



**No
Game**

**No
Life**

**PRACTICAL
WAR GAME**

YUU KAMIYA



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“Elder... Please
put some
clothes on.”

“Nooow——let the
game begiilin. ♥”





“HYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

Someone had kicked down
their door with a mighty shriek.
—It was, well...a **pervert**.
No, not a **perversion**.
A real-live pervert...



"I'll attack twice if my first
Heavenly Smite isn't enough.
And if you're still standing...
I'll attack thrice——
with an
Absolute Smite——"

She didn't care whether she
lived or died so long as
she vanquished a **dragon**.

Victory will be
mine——!!



THE TEN COVENANTS

The absolute law of this world, created by the god Tet upon winning the throne of the One True God. Covenants that have forbidden all war among the intelligent Ixseeds—namely.



1. In this world, all bodily injury, war, and plunder is forbidden.



2. All conflicts shall be settled by victory and defeat in games.



3. Games shall be played for wagers that each agrees are of equal value.



4. Insofar as it does not conflict with “3,” any game or wager is permitted.



5. The party challenged shall have the right to determine the game.



6. Wagers sworn by the Covenants are absolutely binding.



7. For conflicts between groups, an agent plenipotentiary shall be established.



8. If cheating is discovered in a game, it shall be counted as a loss.



9. The above shall be absolute and immutable rules, in the name of the God.

10. Let's all have fun together.



Abstract War Game



Practical War Game



Threefold Levitation



One Pair or Heart Straight Flush



High Card All Raise (Part 1)



High Card All Raise (Part 2)

CONTENTS
PWC

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NEW YORK

Copyright

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Translation by Richard Tobin

Cover art by Yuu Kamiya

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NO GAME NO LIFE PRACTICAL WAR GAME

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Abstract War Game](#)

[Practical War Game](#)

[Threefold Levitation](#)

[One Pair or Heart Straight Flush](#)

[High Card All Raise \(Part 1\)](#)

[High Card All Raise \(Part 2\)](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

ABSTRACT WAR GAME

A group of figures could be made out in the silent chambers of the Elkia Royal Castle's Great Hall. The tension was palpable. Two players were seated at a table, staring wordlessly at the chessboard in front of them as a group of spectators watched nervously from the sidelines. After taking a while to plan his next move, a young man with dark eyes and black hair finally broke the silence.

"...Okay, no way my mind is playing tricks on me. So yeah... Uh—?"

His face froze into a smirk befitting his personality, one that was almost avant-garde levels of twisted.

"Mind telling me when this piece got there?! When did you move this?!"

His yelling echoed through the castle halls—Sora, virgin, eighteen years old.

"Why, whatever are you saying? You couldn't poossibly think I'd ever get away with such an obvious way to cheat. ♪"

The pointy-eared Elven girl who replied had wavy, golden-blonde hair and clover-shaped pupils. She shrugged off Sora's claim with the sunniest of smiles—her name was Fiel Nirvalen.

"You know what I'm talking about! When did my rook get there?! ...Agggghh, I'm putting that back where it was!"

"You can't just move the pieces any which way you want. Looks like you've lost thiiis one—"

"I know you moved it with your magic!! If you're gonna act like you didn't, at least try to *sound* convincing!!"

Fiel was definitely cheating. Any form of cheating would automatically make her the loser. Sora glanced over at one of the spectators—Jibril—who answered his look with a regretful shake of her head. She couldn't tell when or how the piece was moved—therefore, it was impossible to prove Fiel had broken the

rules.

Besides, there was no point in pushing the issue any further; Sora's rook had been moved to a spot that put *Sora* at an advantage!! Fiel had secretly moved one of his pieces in order to make *him* look like a cheater. He looked at her smug face and said:

"Also, couldja cut the invisible crap with Shiro before I'm forced to hang myself?! Have mercy on my neck here!! C'mon—if you value my life at all, you'll hurry up and cancel your spell, kthx!!"

"Fi, don't cancel that spell!! If we play our cards right, Sora just might off himself for us!"

Sora was doing his best to hold it together but was basically ready to take himself out at any moment. One spectator wasn't going to let this opportunity pass her by—Chlammy, who with utmost enthusiasm ordered Fiel to keep up her spell.

"Oh? Do you have any proof that I turned Shiro inviiisible?"

Sora thrust his smartphone at Fiel, who was playing dumb as per Chlammy's request.

"I can still see her in my camera! To my right! She's way whiter than usual, see?! I dunno what you did to her, but hurry up and turn the spell off, you damn monster!!"

"Hmm? So you have proof that picture is real, too? ♥"

Y-you...you bitch—!!

"Same goes for that damn sun!! Get rid of that shit!!"

Sora lost his cool, both physically and mentally. The giant, bright ball floating above him played a large role in that. He was being pelted with rays of hot sunlight, as if he were at the beach in the middle of summer instead of inside a castle.

"Just how many spells do you plan on using?! I'm only a human! Take it easy, will ya?!"

"Why, I have to use so many *because* you're only an Immanity. To be honest, I

wish I could use a lot mooore,” Fiel replied with a pleasant smile, but she was deadly serious—her eyes were as cold as ice.

Why are we doing this again? Sora searched his hazy thoughts for the reason why a simple chess scrimmage had turned into a borderline death match...



“Hey, Fiel. You up for some chess?”

Sora had been the one to challenge Fiel. Depending on the game, he could hold his own against a mage—hell, even a god. Theoretically, it was impossible to cheat at a finite, zero-sum, two-player game with perfect information. The Ten Covenants forbade injury of any kind, including tampering with thoughts and memories. Tampering with the board was similarly impossible, so long as both players paid attention. One could potentially skirt the rules by claiming their opponent was misremembering things, but a third-party observer would prevent that from happening. Simple enough, right? This was precisely why...

...Sora wanted to test this out himself.

So he challenged the most adept magic-user he knew to a match.

“Why meee, though? Whyyy would I play a game with you?”

Fiel had flatly refused his challenge with a smile. After all, she had no reason to show him any of the tricks up her sleeve. Sora had anticipated her answer, so he made an offer—using Chlammy’s memories as bargaining chips.

“In return, I’ll tell you one of Chlammy’s suuuper-embarrassing memories. One you don’t know about.”

He was wagering a deep, dark secret held by Chlammy—without Chlammy’s permission, of course.

“...Um, stop right there. Where do you get off using my memories as a prize for playing—?”

“Why, I know what Chlammy does at night when she’s *all by herself*—are you offering somethiing else?”

“Hey—what?! What are you talking about, Fi?!” Chlammy cried out in embarrassment, but it went unheard between Sora and Fiel, who had already

started their dealmaking. Both players had slight grins on their faces as they tried to suss each other out.

“But you don’t know *what* she’s thinking about when she does it...right?”

“You have yourself a deeeal. ♥ Nooow—let’s get started.”

With a brief but firm handshake, they shared an intense gaze—and agreed to the terms of the match.

Shiro, who had watched the entire exchange from beside Sora, quietly interjected:

“...So, what will...Brother get...if he wins...?”

Oh, right...

She’d figured out that her brother had yet to even think about such details and continued:

“I vote for...thirty minutes of...FiChlam *yuri* stuff... Just keep it, PG-13...”

“Shiro...I’m gonna stop you right there—ChlamFi is a *way* better ship name!”

“...Ohhh... So you’re forcing me to piiick between a secret and *yuri*?!” Fiel agonized as the siblings became engaged in a heated debate.

“You’re not actually considering this, are you, Fi?! I lose no matter what the outcome is! Don’t I get a say in this?!” Chlammy cried out in vain; Fiel was already in the palm of the siblings’ hands.

With a wager like this, Fiel only stood to win. For Chlammy, on the other hand, the opposite was true. It was the beginning of just another game...



Once the game was finished, Jibril captured the loser’s end of the deal on camera using Sora and Shiro’s smartphone and tablet. Meanwhile, the siblings thought: *I’ll never be able to look at a pair of scissors the same way again...*

“Fi! You better not have lost on purpose! Hey, stop—”

“Who, me? I did the best I could, hooonest... Why, I’m feeling really down about it... Maaaybe I’ll feel better if you use the Covenants to figure out where you should touch me right nooow. ♥”

“Sto... I—I can’t say that out loud— Hngh!”

Whether the Covenants had anything to do with this was another matter entirely. The fruits of Sora’s victory were sweet indeed, but rather than basking in it...

“Jibril... Multi-casting is something only Elves can do, right?”

“Yes. Well, if you exclude a few exceptions and fakes, then that should indeed be true.”

“And Fiel’s a hexcaster... Hang on—can anyone cast more than six at a time?”

...Sora was exhausted—cautious, even—as he asked Jibril the question. He thought of the sheer amount of magic he had just gone up against for a simple chess match. Even thirty blissful minutes of FiChlam action didn’t need that much magic.

“As far as I know, there have been two others in the past—two *octa-casters*.”

Jibril’s answer sent beads of cold sweat down Sora’s—and even Shiro’s—spine. A mage capable of casting *two more* simultaneous spells than Fiel? Jibril began sharing what she knew about these octa-casters, as if prodded by the looks of astonishment coming from the two siblings.

“Let’s start with Nina Clive.”

Nina was a god-tier genius who unified the three Elven forces at the end of the Great War; an unprecedented master strategist and tactician as well as a manipulator of magic who compiled the rites of spirit-breaking, a feat that earned the Elf the highest mage title of all time—Grand Magus.

“...Rites of spirit-breaking?”

“Yes, a total of five spells which include Kú Li Anse and Áka Si Anse.”

Aha. Sora had seen these before, during his *Materialization Shiritori* match with Jibril and the Great War RTS, respectively. The first spell was capable of protecting against a hydrogen bomb while the second could pretty much wipe a city off the face of a planet—he remembered both incidents vividly. But something was strange... Why did Jibril know all this stuff? Both siblings immediately began to speculate while Jibril continued her explanation.

“The other was Think Nirvalen.”

Until Nina’s heyday, Think was considered the most adept caster in all of Elven history and an unprecedented genius. Like Nina, she was also a Grand Magus. Think was responsible for the system that served as the basis of all Elven rite compiling—something multi-casters still used to this day. A gifted tactician, she formed the first Elven mage battalion capable of casting large-scale magic in tandem—

“Hmm? Wait a second... Did you say *Nirvalen*...?” Sora interrupted. He, Shiro, and Jibril let their gazes fall to their screens.

“That’s righhht! No point in hiding it! Why, she’s the distant relative of your veeery own Fiel Nirvalen! *Nom*. ♥”

“Hyaaaagh?! That’s my ear! Get that out of your mou—byaaaah!!”

As they recorded this girl-on-girl, Elf-on-Immanity romp, Sora and Shiro couldn’t help thinking, eyes aglint:

...Bet Fiel’s ancestor is rolling in her grave.

“...So, uh...mind if I ask what Think was like?” Sora inquired, quickly ridding his eyes of any remaining glint before twiddling a chess piece in his fingers. Fiel’s mouth, with Chlammy’s ear still in it, began to form a dangerous smile. She looked straight at Jibril and answered with a strange sense of pride:

“Why, there aren’t many details left about her... After allll—”

“Yes—evidently, she lived in the Elven capital that I destroyed with my Heavenly Smite before I *borrowed* all their books. ♪”

Figures. That explains why Jibril knew so much about the two mages. It’s always her fault, the siblings thought with a sigh.

“I suspect the two mages were the same person.”

A perp doing the detective work? First time for everything, I guess, an exasperated Sora thought as he listened to the culprit’s (that is, Jibril’s) deduction.

“First—both of them were born toward the end of the War, approximately three hundred years ago.”

“...Huh. So the only two known octa-casters ever were both *conveniently* from the same generation.”

“Furthermore, any mention of Think Nirvalen seems to disappear from my library the moment Nina Clive steps into the picture.”

“.....”

“And yet, after the War ends, Nina Clive is mentioned one last time when founding Elven Gard before disappearing without a trace, let alone any descendants. Meanwhile, the supposedly defunct Nirvalen lineage continued with the pathetic specimen we see here.”

Jibril pointed at Fiel, who was still having her way with Chlammy even though the thirty minutes dictated by the Covenants had ended. QED.

“I believe Nina Clive might be an alias created by Think Nirvalen,” Jibril deduced with a brief bow.

“Ya don’t say...” Sora twiddled the chess piece in his fingers even faster, then smiled as if he’d figured something out.

“...Brother?”

Shiro had yet to figure it out herself. Sora definitely wanted to let her in on his fun little discovery. He looked at the pawn in his hand, then out the window at the giant chess piece that loomed over the landscape.

“Cool if I ask one more question?”

He asked a question *he already knew the answer to*:

“It’s about chess—*how long has it existed in Disboard?*”

Shiro grinned in realization—“ ” was now on the same page.

“The game’s origins are unknown, but the rules were standardized after the establishment of the Ten Covenants... Master?”

Jibril looked somewhat confused when she noticed the siblings’ devilish grins. A thought occurred to them:

It’s so obvious. Chess definitely existed during the Great War.

That was why Tet created the giant chess pieces around Disboard and

established the Race Pieces and their rules. He was the one who ended the Great War—which undoubtedly happened—by treating it like a game. Sora and Shiro smirked as they wondered—was Tet the only one who thought of war that way...?

Chess is an abstract game—a war played out on a game board.

And Sora had just beaten Fiel, whose ancestor was an even more accomplished mage than herself. Given that chess existed during the Great War:

“I bet there were *others*, too... Others who tried to end the War by treating it like a game.”

Or, in other words—

—a practical war game.

PRACTICAL WAR GAME

On that day, Think Nirvalen lay on the hot sand—so hot, it was turning into glass—staring aimlessly at the sky.

...Even with her long ears, all she could hear was silence. The gem embedded in her forehead looked more like charcoal; her empty eyes with their diamond-shaped pupils flickered with the light from the heavens. That crimson light burned up into the detritus that filled the air: the iridescent blue vestiges of dying spirits. With every blink, Think counted another streak of light falling through the sky, another vessel tumbling from the fleet of Elven airships. As she faded in and out of consciousness, as if waking up from a dream, she thought:

I wonder what the real color of the sky used to be. I wonder what the world was like before the Great War...

It was the first time she ever asked herself these questions...

—.....

When she was a child, she used to think how much better it would be if the world were simpler. *Not* because of how lawless, pointless, worthless, or cruel the world was. She merely felt simpler was better, more natural. This clever, innocent little girl who viewed the world so disinterestedly believed that—

—and the world finally listened.

Whenever her ideas came to fruition, this cruel, broken world slowly but surely became simpler—better. The theorization and systemization of spells and rites is what allowed groups of casters to perform large-scale rites in tandem. Groups of casters were divided into battalions, which were then divided into squads. These squads were organized into tactical formations, which made coordinated attacks possible.

The battalions are the musical notes, the strategy is the musical score, and the battle is the performance. Or perhaps in terms of chess: the pawns, opening

moves, and how the game plays out from there.

The war cries of soldiers, the dying throes of those cut down, the triumphant cheering of the victorious, and the tragic wails of the fallen. It truly was a symphony. It was all that the world and its wars amounted to for the young genius, who had chalked up masterpiece after masterpiece on the battlefield. None of it mattered to her; she knew it was all pointless. She simply did her duty the same way one tidies their room—aimlessly, without rhyme or reason.

The little girl eventually grew into a woman, and the world was more malleable to her will than ever before. The time had come for her to pay tribute to Kainas, the god of the forest, creator of the Elves. She got down on one knee and bowed her head like she was supposed to do—but as always, none of it meant anything to her.

“I commend thee for thy wisdom, thy contributions to Elfkind, and for thy loyalty to me. The advent of a flower such as thyself is surely an auspicious sign that the Great War is coming to an end; that the Elves shall prevail triumphant over the other foolish races and their false gods; that I shall take my rightful place on the throne of the One True God.”

An end to the Great War? The One True God? Of what, exactly?

She was at her wits’ end. When did the War even start? This simpleton who thinks they’re a god doesn’t even know that. A war that never ends is a part of homeostasis. The same way rivers cut away from the earth, the sea crashes into the land, the land parts the sea, and earth buries its rivers. Planets are in a state of constant change. What difference does it make if it is nature or gods and Elves who are doing the changing?

Kainas wants to be the One True God? Sure—let them have it. And if they can’t have that specific throne, then a porcelain one will do just fine...

Before long, Think received the title of Grand Magus—an archmage, the epitome of mages. She continued to manipulate the world around her the way she had since she was a child, without any shred of doubt.

Nothing in existence could stop her.

The world was her playground. She had thought that, at least until today—

this day, this moment.

—.....

An explosion broke the silence and hit her like a punch in the gut. Her hearing eventually returned, along with her consciousness, which quickly reoriented itself. But even the blazing sand she lay upon and the black ash that pelted her like rain weren't enough to stir her to action. The only thing she could move was her diamond eyes. Think Nirvalen looked up and saw a dark figure that covered her with its shadow. It was a man who shouldered a mass of steel many times his own size. He gazed down at her.

“~~~~~”

Think couldn't understand what he was saying—she didn't even know what language it was. But now that she was fully conscious, she managed to recall what had just happened.

...And like always, she stuck to the simplest of terms.

It was a long process, really. The process of leading the Elven army to eliminate the Dwarf race.

She had been *stopped*.

Think had encountered the Dwarves—it was the first time she had ever seen their steel armada flying through the sky. She came under fire...

...and was defeated.

...*De...feat...?*

She wasn't familiar with the term...the concept...the notion of *defeat*. It hit her slowly, like a droplet of water seeping through the crevasses of her brain.

Defeat—? Who lost? How? Why?

Think was bewildered. This had never felt like fighting to her. She crawled her way out of the fallen airship and saw him. It was about to happen. This man was about to do it. He was going to stab her with that mass of steel, and then...

...And...then...?

Her mind refused to grasp the situation, as did her eyes. The massive steel

object the man was now holding above his head—she could tell it was a sword. This was the sword that would do it. This shining sword was going to cut down her many spells, and...then...

When this sword lands, my life will be forfeit.

Think played out the scenario in her mind, which felt completely separate from reality, while she remained motionless on her hands and knees and watched the steel mass in a daze. The blade gleamed as it fell toward her, when suddenly—

“~~~~~?!”

—the moment the man tried to swing it down, it cracked down the middle, and the lower half snapped clean off. The man looked at his blade in astonishment...before bursting into laughter and looking up into the sky.

—,

Think wouldn't understand what had happened until later. Weapons like the man's sword were called spirit arms. They were tools Dwarves used to control their magic. During his fight with Think, he put too much of a burden on his weapon, which caused it to break. She didn't know this yet, though. Even more confusing was why the man was laughing so jovially. Both armies had fallen, and the battlefield was in ruins—put simply, the man was enjoying the fact that his supposedly invincible steel armada was now falling apart.

“—Lóni Drauvnir.”

He told Think his name as he smoothly turned to take his leave. It was almost humorous how thick his accent was. Doing what she imagined was his best not to bite off his own tongue, he said one more thing in his horrible Elven:

“Until we play again. I'll kill you myself.”

...How many minutes, maybe hours, went by after that?

On that day, Think Nirvalen lay alone on the hot sand and black ash. She had at last realized something, just as she finally regained control of her arms and legs and tried to get herself up.

...So this is it... This is the Great War.

It had never dawned on her before, not even as a fleeting thought or a daydream. She couldn't believe it—that this kind of world existed. That the mess of a world she lived in, the one she felt like she was tidying up as if it were her bedroom—

The world isn't mine and mine alone. Who could have known—?!

There existed another person out there, someone who didn't appreciate the way she *moved her pieces* in *her* world. Someone who didn't like the way she tidied up her room—even viewed it as an *attack*, considered it an *invasion*.

The shock you feel when someone opposes the way you view the world—is that what war is?!

She'd been fighting an opponent, someone else with their own game pieces and musical scores.

I was playing a game...

And—she'd lost. To a Dwarf—a mole—of all things. To someone lower than a putrid rat, with no sense of how beautiful the game they were playing was. To someone without any reason or logic or wisdom or class—to that piece of shit Dwarf...

...She began walking. Think looked up at the heavens and laughed to herself. Death rained down on her from the bleeding sky. There were moments when the terrible sight looked almost beautiful to her. Her once-colorless world was turning to Technicolor, and she realized something: This recurring feeling she had experienced after her first defeat ever wasn't pain or anguish.

She painted a vision of the future. The world she thought was cruel and irredeemable now seemed more beautiful than any masterpiece she had ever laid eyes on. She laughed at how moved she was by the realization. Every pointless, meaningless thing she had done up until now suddenly began to make sense—by thinking of what the world could be. Yes—!

A world where she ends the Great War—a world without war. All she had to do was wipe those damned Dwarves off the face of the planet. She now had a reason to fight: to eliminate any and every threat that existed.

She'd claim the world as her own and finally see what color the sky really was.

She took a deep breath—and let out a sigh...

“...Why, you can’t leave me like this, begging for mooore. ♥”

That was the day Think Nirvalen was born.

...Maybe not *born*... More like—the day she *snapped*.

She didn’t know that, though. Anger was something she never thought she’d have to deal with.

Her ominous laughter heralded the monster that had just been born, a genius out for blood...



—Think Nirvalen.

After her defeat, the genius to end all geniuses, the Grand Magus, disappeared without a trace. The Elves were instantly thrown into utter chaos. Now, however, the shock and horror of the whole ordeal was already a thing of the past.

Cheers filled the Elf capital Melryln, which was hidden away in an expansive forest. A *vá-lu-plum* airship floated gracefully through the skies above, and on its deck stood a small Elf—young by even Elven standards. She wore a celebratory sash over an ill-fitting Grand Magus robe—the incessant stream of cheers was for her. This young, innocent little girl commanded the deepest of respect, even from the elderly admiral of the Elven air force, who stood next to her.

“Grand Magus... Your flawless leadership helped us see another victory.”

She had received a title thought to be long lost to history.

“...I did nothing. My thanks to you, Admiral, and the Aseä Alanion, for your help.”

Without an inkling of boasting over her military feats, she simply sent out a warm gaze upon the city she protected. She was sincere when she thanked the commander in her soft, high-pitched voice, reminiscent of a small bell. He could hear her earnestness in her words.

—Nina Clive.

The disappearance of the previous Grand Magus, Think Nirvalen, had brought the survival of the Elf race into question. That question now almost seemed silly, though, with the appearance of a new young genius—an octa-caster practically sent from the heavens. This Elf soon rewrote the group of theories that magic had previously been based on—effectively reducing the previous school of thought to a footnote in Elven history books—which quickly elevated her to the youngest Elf to be granted the title of Grand Magus. She swiftly began reorganizing the Elven military, taking her predecessor Think Nirvalen's place. Her expansion of the army was nothing short of revolutionary. Think Nirvalen, the unrivaled genius among geniuses, was now a relic of the past.

The commander's eyes squinted into a smile. This young Elf outranked him, had more magical talent—hell, she even had more military accolades than he did.

With such a great divide between the two of us, and in so many different ways, I cannot even envy her...

Hence, he merely shook his head in quiet awe.

“Help, you say... You are far too humble. My, my...”

The Elves had received an urgent report from the northern front of an incoming Dwarven fleet, and a massive one at that.

Nina Clive was stationed in the northern city of Helruin with the main Elf army. She was charged with leading the Aseä Alanion, the Elves' most elite battalion, into battle. She rushed to pull troops from the eastern and western fronts in order to build up their defense in the north—a move which may have seemed a bit over the top at the time.

No caution was too much, however, when it came to aerial combat with the Dwarves. Much to the Elves' chagrin, the Dwarves dominated the skies. The Elves went to battle thinking it was going to be a bloody one. They knew they wouldn't lose, but the battle wouldn't end without paying a significant price, one necessary to keep damages to a minimum—or so the Elves thought...

“My, my— Never in a million years did I think we would be able to

exterminate those *moles* and their filthy armada without suffering a single casualty...”

They had managed to destroy the Dwarf armada virtually unscathed. It’s worth mentioning, though—it wasn’t the *Elves* who had destroyed them.

This was the source of the admiral’s awe—no, more like *fear*—he held for Nina. The Dwarves’ high-speed fleet of steel ships had fallen from the sky like leaves off a dead tree, which begged the question:

“...How did you know...when the In-Sein Nebia would appear?”

He asked about the Phantasma that had suddenly *appeared* from behind the Dwarf armada. “Appear” was the most appropriate way to describe what was normally indistinguishable from fog.

The In-Sein Nebia, also known as the fog of death, was among the worst of all the known Phantasmas—a calamity in its truest form. This fog could change size and shape at will—from a dense fog large enough to engulf a desert to a single dew drop.

It consumed anything and everything in its path—organic or inorganic—and decayed it into oblivion. Destroying the Phantasma’s core was the only way to stop its creeping wall of death, a feat nigh impossible given how difficult it was to actually find the core, which could be any drop of liquid in the entire fog cloud. The only feasible way to escape its clutches was to freeze or evaporate large parts of it all at once.

This living absurdity had appeared right behind the Dwarven fleet, which was moving at high speeds in an effort to force their way through the Elf defenses. The Elves had employed a deep defense, assuming a semicircle formation in order to try and sandwich—and potentially surround—the Dwarves.

The Elven soldiers lay in wait, unable to scold their comrades for cowering in fear.

The plan had fallen through. It was a nightmare scenario, especially given how the Dwarves were hightailing it out of there. Truth be told, the admiral almost gave the order to retreat—it was this close to rolling off the tip of his tongue. He looked to his side and saw Nina Clive stifling a cackle as she gave her orders:

“...Hold your positions.”

Everyone—even the admiral—was in disbelief as they watched the Dwarves charge straight toward them.

And it was no wonder. The Dwarves had the Elves at their front and to their sides, and the fog of death at their rear. Their only options were to either charge the Elves as planned or disintegrate inside the fog.

The Elves were ready for the attack, however. They moved the formidable Aseä Alanion into position to intercept the Dwarven blitzkrieg. Even the swift Dwarf armada wouldn't be able to penetrate their bulwark easily. If they were to engage in combat and the In-Sein Nebia were to catch up to them, both armies would perish.

.....,

The Grand Magus Nina Clive, unparalleled Elf genius, wore a thin smile as the Elven forces followed her insane commands. Amidst the tension, fear, and sheer intensity of the enemy fleet and Phantasma piling toward them, there was only silence on the deck of the Elven battleship. Suddenly—

—the Dwarves broke their formation and spread out. They ignored the Elves in order to fight the In-Sein Nebia as they tried making their escape. The entire Elf fleet, including the admiral—save for Nina—stared in utter awe, unable to process what was happening. It was just as Nina had predicted. Instead of facing certain death together with the Elves, the Dwarves decided to use their mobility to flee the In-Sein Nebia with their lives. It didn't make sense—how did she know this would happen?

The majority of the Dwarves fell victim to the Phantasma. It was the moment she had been waiting for.

“All Capture Vessels—deploy probing rites and seize the enemy Phantasma's core.”

The admiral listened to the chilling tone with which she gave her orders. It was as if Nina had this all planned.

...The Grand Magus said no more. The admiral continued his questioning in a weary voice:

“You knew it would appear— You needed the In-Sein Nebia for your plan... Your plan was never about the Dwarves... The real reason you called the Aseä Alanion into battle was—”

“Grand Magus, a report for you.”

Someone behind them interrupted the admiral mid-sentence. He turned around to see a woman dressed in full black, with a black veil covering her face. “The sealing rite has proven effective against the core. We are currently transporting it.”

This woman was not a subordinate of the admiral’s. He had never seen her before. She had accompanied the Grand Magus onto the ship. The admiral didn’t know who she was, but the report she gave the Grand Magus had answered his question.

—Why did she need so many troops?

Without the two battalions flanking from either side, the Dwarves would have easily been able to escape the Phantasma.

Why didn’t she have troops come in from behind to surround the Dwarves?

She needed the Dwarves to engage in combat with the Phantasma in order to buy her time to locate its core. In other words—

—*capturing the Phantasma had been her plan all along.*

The twenty undocumented Capture Vessels accompanying their air force were all the proof the admiral needed. Nina Clive knew the Phantasma was going to appear, and she intended on using it.

“...Next time, if at all possible, I would appreciate learning our combat strategy in full...”

...He undoubtedly recognized Nina Clive’s capabilities. But as admiral of the Aseä Alanion, he was trusted with the lives of his soldiers. He recognized that Nina could use the Aseä Alanion more effectively than he could—that there would be fewer casualties under her than him. He only wished she’d trust him a little bit more.

The admiral mustered an awkward laugh. He knew more than anyone that his

request was unbecoming of a man his age.

“...Yes, I’ll do that if at all possible,” came Nina Clive’s reply.

“With all due respect, Admiral. You aren’t of a high enough rank for such information to concern you. Please know your place.”

The Grand Magus gave a slight sigh when the woman in the black veil added her own biting remark. Unlike the humble Grand Magus, this woman didn’t try to hide the fact that she was an elite and the admiral was a lowly civil servant. She ignored the admiral’s indignant snort and handed a document to the Grand Magus.

“Please give me the word to sign the core over to the care of the Akasha Hollowfication Project.”

Akasha... The admiral had heard the word before. It was an experiment being conducted in the Elven capital of Melryln. The experiment was supposedly taking place under the creator of the Elves—Kainas’s—sanctuary, but the rumors stopped there. Any further information about the Hollowfication Project was above an admiral’s rank...

The Grand Magus signed the document with her petite, dainty hands. She gave it back to the woman, who let out a small, but audible, sigh of relief. The admiral quietly let slip another awkward chuckle.

“...Something you want to say?”

“Oh no—I was just thinking about how young the two of you are.”

He found it interesting that this woman—who took pride in being an elite and was of a rank high enough to be involved with the Akasha Hollowfication Project—also held the genius Magus in revere. She was no different than he was when it came to understanding—well, not understanding—whatever had transpired that day. Her evident *relief* made her remark earlier somewhat entertaining.

...It wasn’t long ago when going up against a Phantasma was considered suicide. Especially against the In-Sein Nebia—that was downright laughable.

Not anymore, though...

The admiral and the veiled woman shared the same thought as they gazed at the Grand Magus from behind.

The young Magus stood atop the stern of the ship, trying to fix the clothes that were obviously too big for her. The tiny gestures she made with her hands as she straightened out her gown were cute, though unbecoming, all things considered. It only added to how terrifying her boundless genius was.

Nina Clive was an Elf of few words. She listened, learned, imagined, thought, and understood—therefore she never needed to counsel in anyone. She let others know what to do, answered their questions, and did what needed doing. They needed only to follow her commands, and everything would work out.

The admiral knew that nobody could possibly understand the world as she saw it through her own eyes—as she stood proudly above all else, watching the world unravel itself before her.

He didn't need to say this out loud; the veiled woman undoubtedly agreed with him, albeit begrudgingly.

All he could do was thank the gods that Nina was on his side, give a bow, and then take his leave.

Nina stood there alone against the wind. No one could fathom what went on in her mind as she gazed down upon her homeland from the ship's stern. No one would ever realize what the strained grin on her face or her teary eyes meant. They couldn't possibly know her thoughts were as simple as:

I want to go home as soon as possible.



And go home she did. It was the first time Nina Clive had returned home in ten days. She locked the door after closing it, then used her multi-casting to double-check that she was alone. After scanning her mansion to make sure no one was listening in on her, she let out a deep sigh.

“Ugggh... I don't think I can take this anymore!!”

That was the first thing to escape her mouth. She threw off her gown, which was weighed down by her many badges and medals. Not a single soul in Elven Gard knew how she felt deep down. With a loud wail, she called out to the

other person in her home:

“Elderrr! You didn’t say anything about the In-Sein Nebia showing up! I really thought I was going to die this time!! All I could do was smile and accept my inevitable doom! Are you even listening?!”

Several thoughts passed through Nina’s mind as she stomped around her house, looking for her elder.

“You are far too humble”?

Humble?! I’m not being humble! It’s the truth: I really didn’t do a single thing!

“How did you know when the In-Sein Nebia would appear?”

I know, right?! Pretty crazy, right?! I’d like to know the answer to that myself!!



“Next time, if at all possible, I would appreciate learning our combat strategy in full.”

That sounds fair. I’ll be sure to let’cha know when I can! Just one problem, Admiral: I never have any idea what’s coming, either!!

She ran around the ridiculously large manor, screaming and bawling her eyes out.

“Let me know what I’m doing, too, will ya?! And what—*Capture Vessels*?! Those’re new! Wouldn’t it be nice if the *Grand Magus* had a wee bit more information than whatever’s on the flash cards you always give me? I mean—the reality is that no one got hurt, and your plans were perfect as usual...”

The *only* thing Nina did for this battle was hand an encrypted message—prepared by her elder—to the Akasha Project Headquarters. No more, no less.

After that, she just stood next to the admiral and tried to look like everything was going according to plan while she followed the script prepared by her elder. The plan relied on her having complete trust in her elder’s orders—had she done anything differently, the entire ordeal could’ve ended *very poorly*. It was a testament to how much Nina’s elder trusted her to follow orders, but... But still —!

“Elder!! Tell me—whyyy does some rando working at the Akasha HQ know more about the plan than I do? Ugggh!! Where are you anyway? You’d better answer me! Eld—”

Nina finally found who she was looking for but was shocked by what she saw.

...Her elder was at the dining table—or, to be more precise, she was *on* the dining table—sleeping with her rear end in the air. There was nothing covering her exposed butt—er, her exposed everything!

Nina Clive lived together with her elder. And there she was, in all her glory! Her *secret* elder, the sole reason she had to live in this absurd manor with no servants, no help, no nothing!

“Argh, Elder! There are lines you shouldn’t cross as a dignified Elf!!”

Nina passed out for a moment, but quickly recovered before shouting herself

hoarse. She darted out of the living room as quickly as she could before spinning around and yelling:

“*Huff...huff...* Wh-what did you do this time? What did you do to end up like that?!”

Nina went back to the entrance, where she’d discarded her gown earlier. Gasping for air, she picked up the gown and ran back to her elder, flung the gown over her elder’s naked body, and promptly collapsed on the spot.

Such shenanigans were relatively commonplace in the Clive residence.

Like the time her elder got so absorbed in her research that she forgot to eat or sleep and almost starved to death after leaving a request for “adequate nutrition to fuel my latest incredible discovery.” Or that time when she got lost in thought while taking a hot bath, only to pass out from overheating and almost drown. Then there was when she nearly died due to exhausting her own magic for science—to the extent that her forehead gem turned pitch-black.

Nina recalled many such dumb incidents. But this time, she’d prepared for the inevitable.

“I left you food and clothes and even a first aid kit! What could have gone wro—**KYAAAAAAH?!**”

Nina’s harried question crescendoed into a scream as a set of tentacles suddenly wrapped themselves around her.

“...Niiinaaa? Why, you ought to know better than to wake me when I’m getting my beauty sleeeep... You’ve sure got soooome nerve...”

Her elder squirmed atop the table, pushing off the garment Nina had thrown over her naked body.

“I’ll have to punish you by taaaking your virginity with these weird tentacles that ooze soooome kind of aphrodisiac. 🎵”

“**Please don’t!!** And what do you mean by ‘weird’?! Don’t tell me you don’t even know where these came from?! I definitely don’t want my first time to be with some unknown set of tentacles! Also, why are you summoning things that you don’t understand all willy-nilly in the first place?!” Nina cried and pleaded

for her to stop. Her elder's tone was friendly, but the smile on her face was absolutely sinister.

Inter-world summoning was an incredibly high-level type of magic. Certainly not something used to chastise your roommate on a whim—especially when the caster is still half-asleep. Nina's elder—currently considered a missing person—was much more frightening than anything you'd find in this world or others. She was a true genius—*the* true genius—and the only one who knew more about Nina Clive than Nina herself. This individual was none other than Think Nirvalen.

“Don't fall back asleep and leave me alone with this... *Mghfgh?!'*”

Nina called out for Think, but she had fallen back asleep as if nothing happened. What's worse was the moment Nina opened her mouth to speak, one of the obscene appendages jammed itself down her throat.

...Oh... I'm starting to feel dizzy...

A vile stench hit the inside of her nasal cavities from the back of her throat, and she began to phase out of consciousness. There was nothing Nina Clive, a penta-caster, could do to stop the creature.

“...? Why, just give in and enjoyyy it while it has its way with youuu... What's stopping you, your pride as a laaady?” Think muttered in her sleepy, dreamlike state of mind. Nina, who was now bound and gagged by the tentacles, glared at Think while she did her best to maintain any semblance of sanity.

“*Sigh...* Niiina? Learning is a part of being a genius—and I've come to learn I pass out withooout food or sleep. I can't survive off research alooone. I figured that out because I am a geeenius. 🎵”

...Is that the sort of thing you need to “figure out”?

In order to keep herself from succumbing to the aphrodisiac ooze, Nina focused as hard as she could on listening to the genius's profound findings.

“So, I had this ingenious idea—no, wait. Seeing as I *am* a genius, I guess it was just a regular idea for me... I had this *regular* idea—an idea no nooormal person could come up with even if they spent their whole life thinking about it!” Think boasted, smiling.



She wiggled her voluptuous bottom proudly. The last vestiges of Nina's sanity gave out at the sight—

“Hngh—?! Hah—wha—ouch!! ...U-urrrgh...”

...Evidently, inter-world summoning was a struggle even for Think; just before Nina was past the point of no return, the tentacles dropped her to the floor and then vanished into thin air. The self-proclaimed genius ignored Nina's whimpering and finished her thought:

“If food has been prepared for meee, I might as well do my research at the dinner taaable!!”

And that was precisely where she had her research spread out. Whenever she got a little hungry, she would nibble away at the food Nina had left her. When she got tired, she would sleep right there at the table. Indeed, she did *everything* at the dinner table!

Nina's breathing was still labored, likely a lingering effect of the aphrodisiac, as she asked:

“...Why do you need to be naked, though...?”

To a normal person, Think's reasoning sounded more like Olympic-level mental gymnastics.

Think sighed at Nina. Alas, the words of a genius are lost on normal people.

“Why, otherwise my clothes would get dirrrty! And then I would have to chaaange! What's so efficient about that? ...There's nothiiiing beautiful about inefficiency.”

Think believed the world should be simple—that it should be beautiful. This definition of the world therefore led her to the simplest of conclusions:

“Why go through the trouble of wearing clothes in the first plaaace? 🎵”

.....,

That kind of defeats the purpose of clothes altogether, Nina thought as she replied:

“So...there's no need for self-grooming or conventional terms of beauty...?”

Think looked somewhat confused at Nina's question. She tilted her head and motioned at herself.

"Why, take a gander at *this*. It's pretty self-evident that I'm beautiful juuust the way I am. ♥"

This is what real beauty looks like. According to Think, she was the perfect specimen of a woman. From Think's perspective, attempting to enhance her already-perfect appearance with clothes and such was flat-out superficial and superfluous. Nina looked at Think's naked body—this self-proclaimed real beauty—but something was off... What was this feeling she had? She almost agreed with Think for a moment, but then she realized...

Oh...the aphrodisiac must be messing with my head! That must be it!

"E-Elder...I'll be honest, when you say all this without clothes on...you look like some kind of voyeur fetishist—"

Just then, Think started casting a spell.

"A fetishist...? How very cheeky of you, Niiina. ♥"

"Ngayaaah! My apologies! Your revolutionary thought process is far too advanced for a lowly peon such as I!! The same goes for your luscious body! It's far too beautiful for us commoners to lay eyes on! That's the only reason I thought it'd be better for you to wear clothes! A-also...!"

Nina had no way of predicting what kind of spell this octa-caster was about to produce. All she could do was get on the floor and grovel.

And yet—and yet...!!

"W-would I be wrong to guess you haven't been taking care of your hygiene these past few days...?!"

When was the last time Think had taken a bath?

She asked the question as indifferently as she could. Think froze in place, pondering for a moment as her infallible logic began to fall apart.

"..... ♥"

She smiled and silently held out her arms. Her logic was as solid as a rock.

How, you ask? Well, Think was going to have *Nina* carry her to the bath, where she could get even more sleep. Think could barely function, to say nothing of her logic. Nina sighed.

This is how it always goes.

“...Okay, you win... Just make sure to get some work done when you wake up, all right...?”

Nina Clive was exhausted.

Why? Why did she have to almost die in battle, only to come home tired beyond belief? Why did she have to see her elder, whom she respected and adored, buck naked? Why did she have to carry her to the bathroom and wash her while she slept?

Why? Why did a regular person like her have to be revered as a Grand Magus? Why had she been forced to take the place of Think Nirvalen?

“...Ah...right...”

She asked herself these questions as she hauled a snoozing Think to the bath. She heard the Elf murmur “Niiina...welcome back...” and looked over her shoulder to see her elder with a smile on her face, as if she had just remembered to say something important.

“.....Yeah... I’m home, Elder,” Nina replied. She recalled the day her life changed...

—.....



Ask just about anyone who Think Nirvalen was and you’ll get a variety of answers. Nina Clive would be the first to tell you, though, that they are all wrong.

Melvail: Located in a pure white forest, the birthplace of the Elf race, and one of the oldest cities. Within this hallowed ground was the oldest—and most elite—magic school in all of Elven Gard: the Garden.

Nina Clive was once a student at the Garden, and Think Nirvalen was her amazingly talented elder. Not just to Nina, though—the entire student body

considered Think legendary, too incredible for them to call themselves her juniors.

Magic was difficult. It took hundreds of years of studying for anyone to even call themselves a mage. Think was the pinnacle of genius; she had managed to complete the entire curriculum—for *each and every* subject—in less than three years. She was noble and gracious. She was humble and never boasted of her genius. She always paid respect to her elders and supported her juniors. She was out of the entire school's league, a beautiful flower that occupied a higher realm of existence.

Until the fateful day she earned the title of Grand Magus, a throne that had been long empty throughout Elven history.

Each and every person who claimed to know Think Nirvalen said the same thing: that she's a genius; a blue rose; a living treasure. That she would bring the Elves victory.

Nina didn't disagree. She stood among the masses revering Think and thought...

They have no idea.

What Nina saw wasn't something so tidily summed up as "genius." Think was something else. She saw the world in a completely different way—she was living in a world of her own. She wasn't just another person who would be tossed around in the whirlwind of chaos that was the Great War. Think was more special than that. She was one who would do the tossing, and yet—

—she was missing something.

...It wasn't as if Nina knew Think or anything. In fact, Think Nirvalen wasn't particularly close to anyone. Nina picked up on this and realized: Think Nirvalen never really looked at anyone. What came off as dignified was simple disinterest, and what seemed like grace was her knowing the true value of people—that to her, juniors and elders alike were equally worthless.

Think's faint smile, the same one she always had on no matter who she was speaking with, told it all. No one could understand her—nor did she so much as desire to be understood.

So...who is Think Nirvalen? Anyone who thought they knew the answer definitely didn't know the real Think Nirvalen. If they really knew her—she who was unknowable—they certainly wouldn't be able to tell you.

Which is why one day, Nina had fleeting thought...

Just once, she wanted Think to meet her gaze. Just once, she wanted to see a genuine smile on Think's face.

Perhaps...not even Think knew *herself* deep down.

Nina was aware that she would never know the answer, and yet she wondered...who the real Think Nirvalen was...and what Think was missing, even if Think herself didn't know what that was. Nina wanted to know those answers... This wasn't a passing thought—no, more like...she pondered it for a long time. She still did, even on the fateful day long ago...

—.....

Think Nirvalen went missing after her loss to the Dwarf fleet. Her survival was never confirmed. The news shattered Elf society like a violent fissure through the earth. And why wouldn't it? They had lost the cornerstone of their entire military—the one who oversaw all research activities, controlled all secret information, and decided their city planning. The loss of their Grand Magus hit the Elves hard—they had put so much of their hopes on Think. All over the country, the Elves were thrown into chaos. Nina, who was a student at the time, had been saddled with the pointless task of gathering information.

She was on her way home that night, tired as could be after working impossibly long hours, when—there she was—gnawing on a cracker on Nina's bed. Her clothes were tattered, and there were wounds all over her body.

“Ah. I've been waiting for you. Niiina. Welcome back hooome! 🎵”

Think Nirvalen had so flippantly welcomed Nina into Nina's own home without a care in the world. Nina Clive felt her heart stop for a moment.

—,

A few seconds passed, and Nina barely managed to self-resuscitate. *Pull yourself together and calm down first*, she told herself. She knew what she

needed to do: straighten out her thoughts, then face the situation at hand.

She just had to calm down and try taking things one step at a time. First things first:

“WHOA, ELDER! BLOOD! YOU’RE COVERED IN BLOOD!!! H-HERE, I’LL HEAL YOU— HYAAAGHHH?!”

Problem number one: Figure out what to do about Think’s injuries. Nina was so shocked and confused that she was unable to control the healing spell she deployed and ended up collapsing onto the floor.

“Niiina... Are you all righhht? You don’t look all right... That is, your face and... why, *eeeverything*...”

“The same...goes for...you...!”

Nina was so worried, she could barely speak.

The world was in a state of chaos after the news of Think Nirvalen’s defeat at the hands of the Dwarves and the fact that she was still missing. Nina was dead tired after spending all her time to find out the Grand Magus’s whereabouts, but there she was! Her famous alumnus was eating crackers on Nina’s bed like she owned the place.

Nina worried Think was going to get crumbs on the bed—actually, forget crumbs. Think’s clothes (at least, what was left of them) were drenched in blood, as was the rest of her body. Plus, she was covered from head to toe in wounds, and yet, “Are you all right?” was the only thing she had said so far—and with a fat grin across her face, at that.

“There’s nothing all right about this! Why are you in my house?!”

“Why, isn’t it obvious? I’m heeere to see you.”

Think continued smiling as she approached Nina, who felt a chill run down her spine.

Think’s injuries were serious—like, within-inches-of-death serious. She was full of bruises, gashes, and scrapes, and clearly had at least three fractures, if not more. Her head was bleeding, too, which meant she’d likely suffered head trauma.

That smile, though. Now that's freaky. She's lost her damn mind.

It was nothing like her usual feminine, refined smile—this was an ominous, devilish grin. Nina almost instinctively knew: *Someone's gonna die.*

Not just *someone*—not even a dozen or a hundred someones, either. Moreover: Why was this monster in Nina's home in the first place?

Once all these thoughts finished running through her mind, Nina came to a realization:

Why does she know my name...?

To Think Nirvalen, Nina was nothing more than a stranger, one of the masses. She was one of the many who felt Think would never so much as spare her a glance; they'd shared a few words, and Nina remembered seeing Think smile at her once.

Nina was silently freaking out when Think, still smiling, casually handed her something. Nina took it without thinking and stared at it in bewilderment. In her hand was a stack of papers clipped together.

"I'm sure you already knooow, but it's a very busy job...being the Grand Magus..."

"Y-yes... Th-that's why everything is such a mess now that you're gone—"

"That's whyyy...you'll do it! You'll be the Grand Magus, starting today! ♥"

.....

.....Nina let out a deep breath. She'd finally figured out what was going on. She laughed quietly to herself.

"Elder, I'm going to take you to the hospital. Come, we'll go together. ♪"

There was something very, very wrong with Think Nirvalen—she was supposed to be the ultimate genius and everyone's much-beloved elder! What on earth had happened to her to make her say something so bizarre?

The Grand Magus? Who? Me? Hmm...? Yeah...no. No, no, no. Not gonna happen. Not in a million years—I mean, I can't. It'd be impossible. And ridiculous. Not to mention, she barely knows me. Why does she know my name?

Maybe she's just an illusion? I must be working too hard.

"I need to see a specialist to help me with these hallucinations I'm—"

Surprised at how calm she was with her accurate self-analysis, Nina reached out for the hallucination. The moment she touched it—

"—Whawhawhawhaa—?!"

—she suddenly felt something smack her butt. A magical strike pushed Nina away from Think, causing her to scream and drop the papers she was holding. She was about to fall over when a spell weaved out of nowhere and caused her to levitate in midair.

"Hyah?! Pyah! Wha—ouch?! Okay! I'm not dreaming! You're not an illusion!"

Smack! Smack, smack, smack! Smack, smack, smack! Something was rhythmically spanking Nina.

"I'm not finished yeeet. ♥ Why, I still need to use the status the Grand Magus holds—"

"Um! You know! Normally you wake someone up—ow!—by pinching their cheek—hey! Are you listening?!"

"I just...don't have time for the trivial work that comes with the position," Think continued, unfazed.

Nina's breath caught in her throat. Not from the literal pain in her butt, nor at Think's claim that a Grand Magus's work was trivial, but at the twisted grin on Think's face when she said:

"This worrrld—*the War*—is all just...a big game."

Her blue eyes looked off in the distance, as if gazing at something, or someone, who had made her realize this. Those once lifeless eyes now viewed the world with a purpose. She now knew what she had to do.

"I'll end the game by wiiinning it. I may need to get a teeeensy bit serious this time around. 🎵"

She was going to end the Great War.

"In order to put my full attention into the game, I need you to haaandle all

the bureaucratic stuff! ♥”

She wanted Nina to take her place as the Grand Magus. Nina’s mind went blank; what Think had just said was absolutely ludicrous.

The magic holding Nina afloat wore off and she fell to the floor, but it wasn’t enough to knock her out of her stupefied state. In fact, she had already forgotten about the pain in her rear from being spanked so much; she couldn’t even process what was going on.

Think picked up the bundle of paper and thrust it back into Nina’s arms, then proclaimed with utmost levity:

“Firrrst, go submit this thesis to the Garden. I need you to graduate ASAP. ♪”

A new thesis written by *the* Think Nirvalen.

Nina gulped; she knew how valuable the disheveled stack of papers in her arms was. Next to the title was a date... *Yesterday’s* date...

She didn’t write this with all those injuries...did she?

Nina was shocked, incredulous. Still on the floor, she barely managed to ask through her labored breathing:

“...Win...? End the War...? How, though...?”

End the Great War? That was impossible. At least, as far as Nina could imagine.

What did Think mean by “win”? Like a game? How would that end the War?

You win today, then lose tomorrow; the next generation wins it back only for the following generation to take it away. It was a long back-and-forth. No, an eternal back-and forth. It was how the world worked.

Let’s say Kainas had their way and eliminated all of the other Old Dei... It probably wouldn’t be enough to bring an end to the Great War. If the Elves won, all the other races would seek to destroy them.

Theoretically, this cycle couldn’t end—it was virtually impossible.

Think just stared back at Nina with the same grin on her face as she replied:

“It’s simple, really... We just need to kill everything on the plaaanet. ♥”

She was basically saying: *No biggie, we'll just destroy the world.*

“That includes the Old Dei and allll the other races. Why, I think the world is due for a nice tidying up—we’ll blow them off the face of the planet with magic. ♪ In fact, we can get rid of every last living thing except youuu and me. Last Elf standing claims the worrrld. ♥”

Think relished in what she felt was yet another one of her ingenious ideas.

She might actually pull it off... Nina thought with a sigh. Not that she agreed with ending the world...but Think was clearly confident. Nina could see it in her eyes; not even the gods had such confidence, the god of the Elves, Kainas, included. Think had a clear vision.

There was definitely something wrong with her; she must have hit her head too hard. Whatever had been keeping this madness at bay up until this point was long gone.

Okay, let me get this straight. She intends to outdo even the gods and destroy the world—an entire planet. This is Think Nirvalen we’re talking about—she just might be able to pull it off.

There was no place in her plan, however, for a normal person like Nina. Nevertheless, she had to ask—although the question shocked even Nina herself as it left her lips.

“...So...why me...?”

She realized she was indulging the insanity, that she should’ve rejected the deranged plan from the start. But she needed to know why.

Did Think choose Nina among a number of other capable candidates? That couldn’t be it; nobody was able to keep up with Think Nirvalen in the first place.

Was it because they weren’t particularly close? No, that couldn’t be it, either. Think Nirvalen wasn’t close to *anyone*.

These weren’t the sort of answers Nina was hoping for.

“...Pardon? Why, Niiina, I thought you had a thing for me?”

—,

“It caught me off guard, since you’re a giiirl and all...but it actually works out better that way for meee. ♥”

Ah, I get it now. That certainly makes sense.

It explained why Nina didn’t reject Think’s proposal outright. You wouldn’t reject a proposal from someone you had a crush on, would you? Nina probably hoped that her feelings were mutual.

A simple enough explanation, although it begged an even bigger question.

Wait—since when did I have a crush on her? And since when was she this brazen?!

Nina struggled to recall whether she had a crush on anybody in the first place.

“...Suuurely you wouldn’t reject a fine specimen like myself? Or are you really that eager to see what the afterlife is like?”

Think must’ve misinterpreted Nina’s silence. Nina heard the ground beginning to crumble beneath her feet as she looked into Think’s lifeless eyes.

“Of c-c-course not!! Me? Reject *you*?! I w-w-w-w-would never even dream of it—”

She quickly denied Think’s claim, then paused for a moment.

She decided she would think about whether she had a crush on her elder later.

Nina definitely looked up to and respected Think—and also felt like she wouldn’t make it out of there alive if she said no to the proposal. So she asked the next logical question.

“A-a-are you sure I’m...*good enough* for you...?”

Think Nirvalen liked herself. She wouldn’t use Nina just for the sake of it. Why pick someone who would just weigh her down on her quest to destroy the world? Nor would Think like Nina just because Nina liked her.

So why? Think came close and looked Nina directly in her eyes, which were begging this very question. She was so close, their lips almost touched. As Nina’s heart began to beat faster, she thought back to a long time ago.

This was what she'd hoped for that day she decided she wanted to get to know Think Nirvalen. After searching Nina's eyes for a moment, Think seemed to have an epiphany.

"Mm. ♪ I need you, Nina. Well...aaactually..." She nodded with satisfaction and smiled the same way she had on that day:

"I need someone who knows me more than I do—you, Niiina. You need to win the game."

Nina finally understood what was going on.

She didn't just want to know Think Nirvalen—she wanted more. It was that simple. On that day, with just a look—just a *smile*...

.....she had fallen madly in love with Think.

This absolute genius—my beloved—needs me. She needs my help to destroy the world as if it were only a game. After all, she can't do it alone. But together—we can do it together. How can I reject a proposal like that?

The world spun on its axis in a never-ending cycle of meaningless destruction. The world was a game. Maybe it was worth a shot—to try to become the one who did the spinning for once. To become a player.

The idea was growing on Nina when the next words that came out of her elder's mouth decided everything for her.

"Not to mention, if I'm going to choose a partner, I might as well choose a cuute one. ♥"

"I'll go submit this thesis! I'll be back soon—could you take care of your wounds while I'm gone?!"

Hello, world? Nice to meet you. Enjoy being destroyed by the two of us!

Kainas? Thanks for everything, but I don't remember asking you to create us Elves!

I—I...I will live for love!!!

Who cares if I need to destroy a world or two? Her smile is enough to make me do anything!

Nina moved like the wind that day.



That gust of lovestruck wind had a thought:

I sure am glad I let that tempest Think Nirvalen send me any which way she pleases.

It didn't matter to her that her role in the master plan pretty much amounted to putting Think in the bath, washing her, and changing her clothes. Or that every day ended with utter exhaustion after using every last one of her five spells to manage their daily routine!

Hidden beneath Nina Clive's abode was a small laboratory. One of the walls was covered in various seals, while books and other documents were scattered wildly throughout the facility.

"Hee-hee... That collar looks good on you, Niiina. Why, go ahead and give me a nice 'woof'!"

Nina's all-powerful elder had dozed off in her chair, a snot bubble appearing from her nose with every snore. Drool dribbled down her cheek; whatever dream her beloved elder was having, it didn't seem to be going well for Nina. But Nina still adored her. She had zero regrets. None whatsoever... In fact, Nina was starting to respect Think even more.

Maybe I should give up on life and become a bum like her. She wondered if that would help her further understand Think. Then she came to the same conclusion she always reached when she toyed with the idea—that she could never do it. She didn't even want to in the first place...!!

"...Elder... You truly are incredible... I—I could never live like this...!"

"—? Oh, Niiina, you're home? Welcome back... *Yaaawn.*"

Nina's grumbling had woken up Think, who greeted her sleepily. Something about the way Think smiled as she yawned caused Nina to blush.

...? Think stared at Nina in puzzlement. Think smelled faintly of soap, had on clean clothes, and her hair was nice and combed. She began trembling and let out a small shriek.

“Wh-whaaat is this apparition...?! N-Niiina, there’s someone in heeere!!”

“...Yeah... Don’t be too shocked, but sometimes I’m in my house.”

Think didn’t remember what she had done to Nina earlier when Nina returned home. Well, more like she was half-asleep, as always...

“...Anyway... *Ahem...*” Nina said, her tired eyes staring off into the distance. “We successfully captured the In-Sein Nebia... It went just as you predicted.”

She didn’t have the energy to get mad over the fact that she almost died doing it a second time. She knew it wasn’t worth it, and continued:

“We also have a proposal from the Akasha HQ about how to handle the Phantasma’s core. They have suggestions on creating a spell furnace and testing the core’s criticality. Here are two more reports from the war headquarters: one public and one top secret. This document describes the current lack of military personnel in the capital—”

Think watched as Nina piled report after report onto her desk.

“I literally just woooke up... I might just have to sue you for overworking a regular old civilian liiike myself. 🎵 Do you think you can handle all this foor—?”

Think turned around in her chair and propped her chin on its headrest as she pleaded with Nina like a child.

“No, I can’t!! Also, we’d have a big problem if there were civilians like you running around.”

To start off with—even at the Akasha HQ, there weren’t many people who understood how Think’s latest rite worked. She’d made it while keeping tabs on military strategy, top secret information, and other developments. No one else could do this. That’s why she was the Grand Magus. Nina, on the other hand—

“You do realize I majored in divination, right? *Not* pretending to be the Grand Magus.”

“I know thaaat! ...Why, you should thank me—I saved you from wasting your life studying something as impossible as divination... I know! How about you thank meee by kissing my feet?”

“It wasn’t considered impossible until that darn thesis you gave me!”

The thesis Think had given Nina was a series of notes Think had scribbled down onto a bunch of papers.

Her thesis was titled “The Temporal Plurality of Spirits.” The gist was that space and time were unified in the spirit gallery; it was more than enough to have Nina graduate from the Garden. Overkill, even. In fact, the thesis completely revolutionized how Elves perceived magic.

“Do you have any idea what I went through?! My peers despised me after I became the Grand Magus and pretty much debunked the entire major with your principle of indeterminate possibilities!!”

The principle of indeterminate possibilities... To put it simply:

Not even a god can know the future, dumbass. smh

Nina’s classmates never forgave her for what she did to the major.

“Divination was the one thing I thought I could learn to help you...” Nina started tearing up.

“Nina, I don’t need you to be able to see the fuuuture,” Think said with a forced smile. Nina didn’t know what she meant. “Hmm, I can hardly think straight. Maybe I’m not fully awake yet... Why, I need some stimulation. 🎵”

Not fully awake, you say? You were awake enough earlier to summon a creature from another world...

Still teary-eyed, Nina sighed at Think’s request for stimulation. “I expected as much, so...I bought some more of those, um...naughty books...you’re so fond of...,” she said haltingly.

She then took out an opaque bag full of reading material: Think’s usual erotic novels. Think claimed she couldn’t get her work done without reading a couple of these first. Nina wondered what the bookstore staff thought about Nina Clive...the Grand Magus...buying such books—from the men’s section, no less—so often.

Nina held back tears as she proffered the novels, but Think appeared to have something else in mind.

“Forget the books—I feel like playing with your cute little tits todaaay. That

should get me going. 🎵”

“Whaaat?! P-please don’t!! I...I don’t even have—”

“Have boobs to play wiiiith? I know—how about I liiick them instead? ♥”

Excuse me?!

“Why, I feel like that’s juuust the thing I need. You can pay me back laaater. 🎵”

Think steamrolled Nina like a sexual bulldozer. This situation had several definitions of harassment written all over it. Nina backed away despite knowing she didn’t have a say in what was about to happen.

“Okay...I’ll try and make it extra niice for you. ♥”

Think turned toward her desk and snapped her fingers—the seals etched into the wall began to glow. This was followed by the space around them *snapping* in a similar fashion. Think’s demeanor, the light, the smell—everything about the space and time they occupied had changed in an instant.

An incredible volume of spirits filled the air, so dense that it overwhelmed the young penta-caster. Nina knew they were both still in her basement—in Think’s underground laboratory. The now faintly glowing rite inscribed on the wall had altered and expanded this very space.

It was as if they were in another dimension.

The room where Think did all her research was now larger than the entire Akasha HQ. The difference in size wasn’t what made the space otherworldly, though.

Below them was a gargantuan dome-shaped hall; inside was an altar made of thorns, supported by eighty-six thorny columns. Etched into the dome were countless seals that pulsated like veins. A multilayered crystalline structure sat at the altar’s center like some sort of offering.

This structure emitting an ominous light—was a massive water lily bud.

These were rites of spirit-breaking—a new type of magic credited to Nina. These ultimate multifold composite rites operated under the protection of the Elves’ creator—Kainas, god of the forest. By exploiting the ether Kainas used to protect the Elf homeland, these new rites caused spirits to disintegrate, thereby

generating exorbitant amounts of power.

The rites of spirit-breaking used Kainas's ether like firewood; naming them Anse, which meant protection, was Think's idea of irony.

[Even a shitty god is a god. I'm just glad our god finally gets to serve a purpose.]

Think said this to Nina telepathically. Saying such a thing aloud may have resulted in divine punishment being dealt right then and there.

...That's right: The Akasha Project was a team of scientists working on one of the four Anses.

The thorns, the dome, and the water lily bud: These were the three other rites of spirit-breaking. But no one knew about them other than their inventor, Think—and Nina.

Nina was dumbfounded every time she set eyes on Think's creations, and every time, she would ask the same question.

"Elder...why are you hiding these from the Akasha HQ?"

Nina—no...no one knew the answer to that, except for Think. Something bugged Nina as she listened to the explanation of what these rites could do: large-scale shifting. Magic deactivation. Spirit disintegration.

Nina knew that creating and eventually using these rites in war would likely leave another race helpless to defend themselves.

"Niiina...have you ever played a card game before?"

Think followed up her own question the same way she always did:

"You don't reveal your trump card until the very laaast moment: the showdown."

Think grinned as she loomed over her precious creations. They were nothing more than cards to her. The same went for her giant laboratory and all its gadgets: mere tools, every last one of them.

She was eyeing her massive desk—another dimension, in a sense. This was Think Nirvalen's world—a game. Laid across the desk were a multitude of

squares etched into a map...and thousands of chess pieces.

This is Think's world, Nina thought before correcting herself a moment later. Think had a slight smile on her face as she read through Nina's report, her gaze razor-sharp.

"...With the exception of the Dwaaarves, the races are oh so predictable...as allways."

Think repositioned each of the chess pieces one after the other. She looked like a completely different person as she moved the pieces to show how the War—nay, the game—was playing out across the world. In other words, Think Nirvalen herself was the world.

".....Elder... Why can't you always be this serious...?"

This is the same person who only moments ago wanted to lick my breasts...

Nina's melancholic sighs of lament went unheard.

"...Why, now that we have the core...hee-hee...it's almost time for our final showdown."

Think snickered; the In-Sein Nebia was in her grasp. Nina's gaze fell to the chessboard; she saw the critical situation the Elves were in and frowned dubiously.

They had at last captured and controlled a Phantasma, although it hadn't been without significant failure. The Elves had once collaborated with the Fairies to try and control a Phantasma known as the Cloud Vortex. Their eventual failure resulted in their test subject going berserk. This forced another race of magical beings—the Flügel—to intervene and clean up their mess. The Elves had been on the Flügel's bad side ever since.

Their failure also revealed the spatial boundary where Spratul—the home of the Fairies—existed, inviting an attack from the Demonia race. In order to help their Fairy allies, the Elves were forced to fight on multiple fronts. The situation was dire; the Elves paid a huge price to capture the Phantasma and complete the Akasha Project.

Nina still didn't understand how they got there, though, so she asked the

question that was on everyone's mind:

"Elder...how did you know the Phantasma was going to appear?"

Nina—no...not even the woman from Akasha HQ had known the Phantasma was coming.

"Hmm? I didn't. You know we can't predict their movements, dooon't you?"

"...Huh? Oh... I know, but...um...what I'm trying to ask is—"

A Phantasma was a vaguely sentient natural calamity. Predicting their movements was nearly impossible. This was particularly true for the In-Sein Nebia. Hence why Nina asked, and why Think continued to answer her.

"Why, I had the *moles* bring it heeere for us. ♥"

.....

.....*Okay, calm down, Nina Clive.*

Nina knew by now that it wasn't good for her to get riled up about every little thing Think said. She took a deep breath: *Let's take a moment to calm down and think this through...*

"The D-D-D-Dwarves brought that to us?! B-b-but howww?!"

As always, Think accelerated Nina's violent spiral into confusion.

"I don't know. ♥ I'll figure it out so that it'll be easier to catch the neeext one. 🎵"

No...no, no, no... That's not how these things work.

Nina assumed Think knew the Phantasma was going to appear, but that hadn't been the case: Her battle strategy banked on the Dwarves bringing it to them.

But she didn't actually know *how* they would do that?!

So she planned the whole thing on the Dwarves bringing the Phantasma—without even knowing if it was possible—then proceeded to turn the plan on its head?!

"Why, it's simplllle, really... Take a look at the nooorthern front."

Think placed her hands over the desk, and the chess pieces began moving on their own in a sort of instant replay. The pieces that represented the Dwarves Nina had fought with were moving two spaces at a time. Though they came from the east, they had moved around to the north to mount an attack. Think tilted her head and continued:

“Whyyy would they bring so few ships to Helruin?”

“Hmm... I wonder...”

“If *he* had been stupid enough to think this high-speed fleet was capable of infiltrating our most well-guarded territoryyy...why, this game would already be over. 🎵”

A straight charge from the Dwarven forces would certainly end in victory for the Elves. Even Nina knew that—so what was *he* planning on doing?!

“He had something up his sleeve—and I figured out what it waaas. ♥”

If only the Dwarves hadn’t attacked head-on and instead used the In-Sein Nebia elsewhere... Wait—?!

“That’s a huge stretch!! How on earth did you know he had a Phantasma—?!”

“Why, of course I knew. He *needed* to bring it along, after allll.”

We risked our lives over that titanic leap of logic, Nina wanted to scream, but Think cut her off, turned back to her desk, and pointed to a giant chess piece.

“Why would they come allll the way from the northern sea to attack Helruin?”

Indeed, there was no reason for the Dwarves, coming from the east, to move all the way north and cross the sea. Had they attacked from the east, they could’ve also brought troops on the ground for an even larger offensive. Nina couldn’t even figure out why they chose Helruin in the first place.

The battleships were moving fast... Did they intend on ambushing us?

Nina shook her head; that couldn’t be it. The Dwarves weren’t the type to hide in the shadows. So why had they approached from the sea...?

Think smiled as she watched Nina fail to come up with a good reason. Then she explained:

“Why, there was no real rhyme or reason to their attack on Helruin.”

“.....Come again?”

“But taking the northern route—that was their winning strategy.”

It didn’t matter *where* the Dwarves attacked. In other words...!

“They thought they could win any baaattle—so long as they came from the northern sea.”

They had a way to beat the Elves in their most fortified city. They could attack from the sea to keep the Elves from seeing their ace in the hole: the fog of death.

“Those moles had a way to predict the Phantasma’s movements...but not a way to controool it. 🎵 So they got it angry—”

—and used their greatest asset—their high-speed airships—to provoke the Phantasma!!

“Then they retreated as quickly as they could to the nearest Elven city. ♥”

“.....”

Nina listened to Think explain the plan as if it were her own idea. She had a point, though... Usually, the sight of the In-Sein Nebia alone would be enough to send the Elven forces into chaos. They probably wouldn’t have been able to escape the Phantasma. The chain of command would deteriorate in all the confusion. There likely would’ve been no survivors. The Dwarves would then penetrate their defenses and lay waste to a helpless Helruin.

That is, if their hand hadn’t been read by the Elves, who stood their ground and didn’t let a single ship pass. The rest is history.

Think began fiddling with the chess piece in her hand.

“I’m going to figure out howwww they predicted the Phantasma’s appearance—and use it for our army. 🎵”

Think smirked. Nina finally understood what had happened and started shivering.

Can’t predict where the Phantasma will show up? Just find someone who can!

The Elves had won more than just the battle, or even the capture of a single Phantasma—they had acquired a new tactic they could use in the future by stealing the Dwarves' method of anticipating the Phantasma's movements. Nina shuddered at the thought, then remembered something Think had said to her earlier.

"It's simple, really... We just need to kill everything on the plaaanet. ♥"

Think had so gleefully declared whoever was left standing once the world was destroyed would win this game.

She wanted to use every last drop of her power to annihilate everyone and surpass even the gods.

Now, however, she called it by its name: the rite that would allow her to do all this.

"...Áka Si Anse—all that's left is to tryyy it out... 🎵"

This was the goal of the Akasha Project: the final rite of spirit-breaking.

—Devoid Zeroth Guard—Áka Si Anse...

A 186-fold rite that operated under the protection of the Old Deus Kainas.

Phantasma had their very own spirit corridor at their core. By forcefully rewriting the magic that held the core together—thus destroying it—a massive amount of spirits was released. This rite of spirit-breaking set off a chain reaction to break these spirits down one by one.

That made it possible to take out an entire army—provided they could be assembled in one spot—in a single spell. Nothing would remain, either. The enemy could be Flügel or another Phantasma; it made no difference. Anything that got caught up in this spirit-breaking rite's path would not only fall victim to the chain reaction, but fuel it. Áka Si Anse theoretically had enough power to destroy an Old Deus. With enough of these rites, Think could destroy the entire planet.

"Once we figure out how to track down the Phantasma, we can begin creating more rites of spirit-breaking. Theeen—it's checkmate."

Think smiled. She could finally see world destruction on the horizon. There

was a striking beauty to her inconceivably unsettling grin. Nina frowned to herself.

Ah, I almost forgot. This is the real Think Nirvalen.

She was the player Nina had fallen in love with even though the two of them were in vastly different leagues. Nina Clive knew she would never be on Think Nirvalen's level; it just wasn't in the cards.

The only person capable of outdoing Think was Think herself, especially when she got serious.

Even when Nina and Think had first met, she had always been in a league of her own. A born genius. She put her everything toward a single goal, but it still wasn't enough; she cast aside her prestige and status...although Nina had to wonder if that was really necessary.

The rites they gazed out upon were the culmination of Think throwing away her life. She was going to find out just how far the Elf race could push their limits. As far as Think was concerned, there were no such things as limits. Nina knew that Think embodied limitless possibilities, but she quelled these feelings to ask the question that needed to be asked.

"B-but Elder... Do you really think the Dwarves—er, *he* will let you pull it off...?"

The *moles*—the Dwarf race—weren't even a footnote in Nina and Think's eyes. The two of them referred to their sole enemy as *he* and *him* in order to pay him the respect he deserved. *He* was the only one who dared to play against Think in this massive game of chess. The only soul to ever make Think get serious—and the only person she wasn't able to crush.

Lóni Drauvnir.

Nina had yet to meet him, while Think had only ever met him once. And yet—they knew that just like Think, he was a consummate leader. He was pulling all the strings in battle.

Dwarves couldn't cast magic without a catalyst. Just another reason they were lesser creatures. Lóni, however, had figured out how to engrain core rites into weapons to create what are called spirit arms. Just like how Think

formulated new spells and magic, he crafted new weapons. A genius just like Think, the only person in this world who had ever made her taste defeat—another player in the game of war.

Nina knew this was a war between the two of them.

She figured he must be tremendously intellectual, rational, and most importantly, attractive. Think recognized his prowess, to the point where she knew she couldn't defeat him on her own. He made Think realize that she and Nina had to use everything at their disposal to go against him. Nina respected him—envied him, even. More than anything, she felt a deep sadness when she thought about him.

...Such a shame he had to be born a disgusting, smelly mole. What could he have possibly done to deserve such a cruel and unusual punishment?!

Nina mused about how unfair the world could be. Think smiled.

“Needless to say, *he* won't be an issue. Here's my last question for you.”

She returned the board back to its original placement and glanced happily at the fleet of Dwarves Nina had fought earlier.

“...Whyyy do they have all their firepower here?”

“Huh? Wasn't that so...they could ambush us with the Phantasma?”

“Correct. 🎵 And we caught their little Phantasma...”

Think smirked. Not at Nina, but at the chessboard—no—at Lóni Drauvnir. It was as if Think could see him at the other side of the board. She asked her next question in singsong.

“Now that their main army knows we have the Phantasma...what do you thiiink they're doing? 🎵”

“_____!!!!”

The Phantasma was lured to their territory with a small fleet of high-speed ships. That made sense; it was a way for the Dwarves to take over, potentially even destroy Helruin. If they knew it was going to work—then why? Why didn't they go all the way—?!

“Was it a diversion?! Then that would make their real aim—oh no...”

“Oh yes. ♥ Good job figuring it out yourself, Niiina. You’re right. Why, their real goal is—”

Nina grew pale as she figured out what was really going on. Think grinned and grabbed the black king—the piece that represented Lóni—and set it down on the board.

Can’t predict where the Phantasma will show up? Just find someone who can.

He and Think were evenly matched. In which case:

Can’t control a Phantasma? Just find someone who can.

He was going to find out how the Elves caught one and what they would do with it, in a place worth attacking:

“—right heeere: the capital. ♥”

“What—?! Wait! Aren’t there a lot more things you should be doing than sleeping around the house in the nude and violating me with tentacles?!” Nina frantically shouted.

She was gritting her teeth now that she finally understood everything.

The Dwarven attack on Helruin had been a mere litmus test—!

Had the Elves no way of controlling the In-Sein Nebia, the Dwarves would lay siege to the Helruin front.

And if the Elves could control it?

Then the Dwarves would steal their method from the capital! It was a trap—a *twofold trap!!!!*

“Th-there’s nothing but a lone battalion stationed in the capital right now!! Tell me what I need to have them do!!”

A single battalion was made up of six hundred of the most elite Elf soldiers—there were five Elven battalions for a total of three thousand soldiers.

The éva-le-siela and vá-lu-plum airships are no match for the bulk of the Dwarven army—!! Think appeared to be enjoying how distressed Nina was by all this.

“Why, we’re mooore than a match for them.” Think was grinning from ear to ear. “I’ve got a nice, biiiig present for those dirty moles. A brand-new military asset. ♥”

—,

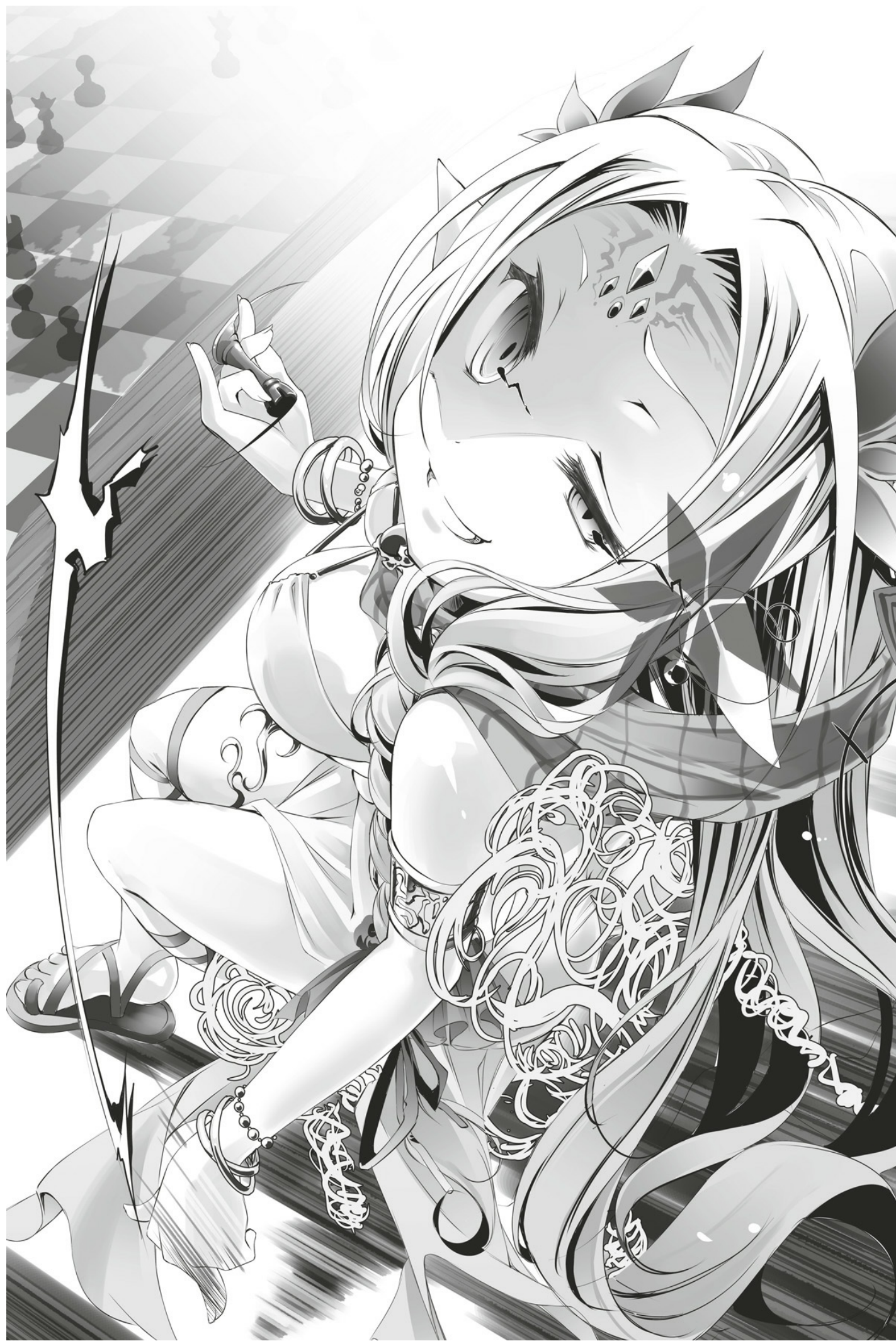
—Ah—!

“You’re going to use Áka Si Anse?! But we haven’t completed the spell furnace yet!!”

Now that they had the Phantasma’s core in their hands, Áka Si Anse was essentially ready for use. The only thing left was a furnace they would use to protect the city from the reaction, but it was still in its testing phases at the Akasha Project HQ—oh...

Ohhh. Ha-ha... Ah-ha-ha. No, no. No, no, no. It can’t be. She wouldn’t. Would she? I mean, she does kinda want to destroy the world and all. But does that mean she actually would...?

Nina prayed her interpretation of what Think was getting at was a mistake.



*

“We have the perfect bomb righhht here in our capital. ♥”

Think grinned fiendishly as she pointed to the ground below her. Nina’s prayers were in vain. Think couldn’t look more elated.

No point in praying if she’s gonna destroy the planet and all the gods with it...

“Yeah...it’s perfect all right—**perfect enough to kill you and me, too, isn’t it?!**”

Nina tearfully pointed out this little detail and managed to cling to a semblance of her sanity. A lot more was on the line than just their own lives. Was Think going to blow up Áka Si Anse right under Melryn?

Two hundred thousand Elves, the Senate, the sanctuary...hell, the entire forest would be decimated. Sure, Áka Si Anse would make quick work of the entire Dwarf armada—but she was forgetting one little detail.

“Is there even a point in killing the Dwarves if there are no Elves left?!” Nina hollered in a panic.

Think pouted. “Mmm? Niiina? Whooose fault is it that the capital has been left defenseless?”

“...The failed Phantasma experiment was—wait, that’s *my* fault?! But those were *your* orders!!”

“*Siiigh...* And whooose fault was it the Dwarves are going to attack the capital?”

“Are you trying to blame me for capturing the Phantasma?! Even though that was your plan, too?!”

“Okay...so whooo made Áka Si Anse functional in the first place?”

“The...Dwarves...brought the Phantasma..._____”

Because that...was your plan! Nina wanted to cry out, but she saw Think’s grin was growing wider and wider with each of her retorts, so she shut her mouth.

This was all her elder’s fault—but wait.

The strange feeling lingering at the back of Nina's mind came into focus. A chill as cold as ice shot down her spine.

—Why? Why did the Dwarves have to bring a Phantasma, of all things?

—Why? Why did they have their troops ready by the capital after we caught it?

—Why? Why did Think Nirvalen have three rites of spirit-breaking hidden away?!

No...way. No freakin' way—!!

There was only one justification for detonating Áka Si Anse under the capital.

Nina was speechless. Think affirmed her suspicions by showing her the palms of both her hands. In other words:

“It's time for our showdown. It's time to show our haaands.”

Everything she'd spent the past ten years—no, decades—doing. Every military tactic and strategy in place from here on out.

Everything was in the palm of her slender hand.

Nina stood there, shocked and dumbfounded. Think merely chuckled as she continued.

“Niiina? Theoretically...what is the maaaximum damage Áka Si Anse can cause with the current test spell furnace?”

Under twenty percent. That's enough to destroy the heart of the capital—no, it would only destroy the heart of the city! It's not enough to defeat all of the Dwa—

“Niiina? How will the Dwarves pose their attack on the city...when they are trying to learn about the Phantasmaaa?”

That was easy. There was a 90 percent chance—no, 100 percent chance that they would surround the capital.

The Dwarves' goal was to figure out how to utilize the Phantasma. The Elven capital's defenses were unusually paltry—it couldn't be a more obvious trap. Worst-case scenario, the Dwarves would end up fighting the Phantasma.

Surrounding the city was their only option.

“Niiina? In that case, which of the three rites of spirit-breaking would be the best to uuuse?” Think asked as she gazed at the three structures below them.

Elder... How long have you been planning all this...?

Nina didn’t even need to ask the question. She knew why the Akasha Project HQ had been set up here. The test furnace’s power, its effects, the capital being left defenseless—there was no need to ask such a foolish question when the answer was staring her right in the face.

Think had been planning this from the very beginning. Maybe even since the day she asked Nina for her help—!

“I have *five cards* up my sleeve. Why, think of them as my trump caaards, my aces in the hole for defeating *him* and the entiire Dwarf armada.”

Think smiled from ear to ear. She spun around in her chair and faced Nina.

“Do you think he’ll see any of this coming...Niiina?” she asked in earnest, now almost nose to nose with Nina as she gazed into her eyes.

“There’s *nothing* they can do... Even if they know something is coming, they won’t be able to defend themselves against a weapon this powerful!” Nina replied, then began shaking uncontrollably. Think’s smile never wavered.

Best-case scenario, they got away with destroying just half the city. This was their sole chance to defeat *him*, though. They wouldn’t get another. *He* was the only enemy worth defeating—the only one Think knew she couldn’t kill alone.

The Great War was a product of these two players—Think and Lóni—turning the gears of the world.

Nina herself smiled when she internally dared the man to predict their five trump cards. Even if he managed to read a card or two, Nina knew Think would be one step ahead of him.

...Hmm? Nina only saw four rites of spirit-breaking here: three, plus Áka Si Anse...

“...? What did you mean by five—? **GYAAAAAAH?!?!**”

“Why, things are about to get rough! I’d better lick your little titties while I still caaan!!”

Nina tried to ask about the fifth card, but was ravaged by Think before she could.

“Nom... ♥ You have the flaaattest chest I’ve ever seen—*slurrrp*—but it works. ♪”

Stripped of her shirt, Nina was helpless in resisting the octa-caster’s relentless licking. Think nommed and nommed away at Nina’s modest bosom. The most Nina could do to resist the relentless tonguing was to accept it was going to happen and think of something else.

The Great War—which had raged on for an eternity—was going to end. Think Nirvalen was really going to pull it off. She found a way to destroy the *planet*. She had the world and its gods wrapped around her finger—but she wasn’t the only one in that position.

Lóni Drauvnir was in the same league. It didn’t matter which of them brought the game to an end... The world’s destruction was at hand.

As Nina thought more about this, she was met with a fleeting pang of anxiety.

What if...Think and Lóni aren’t alone?

What if...someone outmaneuvered them: a third player who toyed with the world just as they did?

...Regardless, the Great War was almost over. It was inevitable... Nobody could stop what was coming.....



A few days passed.

The black ash had accumulated over the desert like a sheet of glistening snow, where a single figure in a coat and mask could be seen. They were looking up at the ash—which had an azure tint to it as it fell from the blood-colored sky—and waiting. No one had called them here, nor was anyone expecting them. They were, after all, about to be ambushed.

These two weren’t supposed to ever meet. They couldn’t read each other’s

thoughts. And yet—she *knew* he would come.

The sky, even the terrain was strangely similar to that day long ago—the day he told her *“Until we play again. I’ll kill you myself.”*

He would be here. He had to. Otherwise, this War—this game—would never truly end.

After a long while of waiting, another figure slowly made its way toward her. Their large frame was similarly clad in a coat and mask.

This was it. They had finally been reunited. They had both wished for this confrontation ever since their last.

Neither of them removed their masks despite their reunion, which was just as miraculous as it was inevitable. Neither of them needed to see each other’s faces to know who they were, but they could tell exactly what they had brought with them.

Think Nirvalen was the one who had been waiting.

She had rewritten the laws of magic twice, turning it into something of an art. That made her practically omnipotent. She was an epoch-making octa-caster and a mage the caliber of which the world would likely never see again. Behind her was the expansive forest in which lay the Elven capital of Melryln—the territory of the forest god, Kainas.

And it was Lóni Drauvnir who approached her.

The man who had revolutionized engineering with the use of catalysts and seal rites. He was an unprecedented user of spirit arms and a catalyst craftsman the caliber of which the world would never see again. On his back, he carried a giant iron sword twice his own height—the catalyst for his seal rites, one of his spirit arms. Farther behind him, the sky was filled with the imposing sight of hundreds of bulky airships.

“

The two of them kept their distance, trying to gauge the other’s power. Two unparalleled geniuses silently readying their weapons. There was nothing for them to say during this fateful reunion. Everything that needed to be said had

been the day he vowed to kill her by his own hand—that they would strike each other down. That much was certain.

This was a game. The more players there were manipulating the world, the more interesting it was. But there was only one world to be taken, one prize—and there was always a winner and a loser.

——,

The iron armada eventually passed overhead, toward the Elven capital, but they paid it no mind. Shots could be heard firing in the distance—it was their signal to begin fighting.

Their practical war game was about to decide the fate of the world.



Meanwhile, far north from where the two titans clashed—

“Squad Six—engage defensive formation two.”

—Nina Clive whispered her orders. A loud boom rang out as a wall of light climbed into the sky and covered the city.

At the same time, a tidal wave of iron airships inched closer and closer to the forest that shrouded the Elf capital. The ashen, bloodred sky became a steely blue as the Dwarf armada encroached on Melryln.

“.....Squad Seven—engage defensive formation six.”

The Elven regiment was made up of three thousand of its most elite soldiers, which were broken up into squads of two hundred. They took turns casting large-scale defensive magic to protect the capital from the incoming bombardment. An invisible barrier above the capital and the surrounding forest kept the enemy fire at bay—not a single shot penetrated its force. All that could be seen was the blinding light of the shield, and all that could be heard were the explosions of the enemy attack.

“Grand Magus! We’re using too much magic—!!”

“We need to break up their attack, or fight back—otherwise, they will penetrate our defenses! Please give the orders!!”

Each of the commanding officers under Nina was uneasy and completely shaken. Their status reports sounded more like pleas. The bombardment was unlike anything they had seen before. There was only one thing keeping the Elf troops together—

“.....Squad Eight—engage defensive formation one.”

—and that was Nina. She continued to calmly whisper her orders with pinpoint focus.

She didn't call for breaking up the Dwarves' attack or striking back.

Everyone knew why: There were too many of them. Even if the Elves could block their bombardment, each two-hundred-Elf squad could only last so long. They needed to switch between squads to keep the barrier up and running, and even that wasn't very sustainable. A counterattack was out of the question. Sending out a battalion or two to fight the armada would be like pissing in the ocean.

Not to mention, the enemy's throngs of metal airships were state-of-the-art. Each shot fired was followed by an invisible trail and two loud explosions. It pierced their first wall, only to be caught by a second. The Elves couldn't afford to let up their defense.

The airships' amplified spirits were being condensed into an energy too fine to be seen by the naked eye. These were the most ships the Elven forces had ever been up against, and new models at that... It could very well be the entire Dwarf fleet—

“Grand Magus! The enemy fleet is positioning to flank the city—we're being surrounded!!”

The ships pressed forward as they continued their bombardment, eventually pushing past the defensive line and surrounding Melryln. A single Elf remained composed amidst the chaotic onslaught.

“Yes... We need them to surround us.”

Nina had a big smile on her face; she knew everything was in the competent hands of Think Nirvalen, who manipulated the world as she pleased.

And just like Think, Lóni probably had his own ace up his sleeve: maybe these new ships, or something else entirely.

“...Very impressive for mere moles. However—”

But it didn’t matter what they had. Their new toys were nothing more than that: toys. Everything in the Dwarves’ arsenal operated on spirits.

“—those ships will be their coffins.”

The same fat grin remained on Nina’s face as she left the war room to her subordinates.

Nina ignored the chaos and enhanced her vision with magic to search the southern forest’s outskirts. She was looking for Think.

She eventually found her in combat but couldn’t tell what was going on. It’s not that she was too far for Nina to see—whatever Think was doing, it far superseded Nina’s realm of comprehension.

Nina was speechless for a moment before realizing that this reaction was only natural. She had never seen Think out on the field before—let alone using the full extent of her power. Those flashes of destruction were likely the results of Think’s thesis on the convergence of space-time within the spirit gallery. She could speed through time itself—probably something she thought up following her defeat by Lóni—and yet, she still couldn’t shake him off.

Think was undoubtedly going far beyond the limits of the Elves—no, the limits of all living things. Nina closed her eyes as Think weaved in and out of time to approach the Dwarf—

“Well...Elder will still come out victorious. Resist as you may, but please accept your death in the end.”

—and offered a brief elegy.

Nina Clive watched as the shadows of the giant ships encroached around the capital’s airspace, then flew back home—she needed to prepare for the imminent showdown.



Apparently, Nina didn’t know it was impossible to control time.

As long as living things existed in a fixed point in time—no, even if they had the same plurality as spirits, which allowed them to span across time—going into the past would produce infinite present-day worlds, while the indeterminate possibilities of future worlds prevented anyone from time-traveling forward.

So Think focused on a single point of time and expanded only that, to make time effectively move quicker for herself.

An attack was coming straight for her as she sped through time. No—a two-pronged attack. Lóni had slashed with his sword and released a wave of scorching heat that sliced through a grotesque sand giant Think had transmuted. Think was moved—she only barely managed to avoid the blow via her enhanced grasp of time.

Lóni's sword—the spirit arm of his own invention... Ah... It was truly...

(It's like a work of aaart. I absolutely looove his weapon. ♥)

She never could have dreamed of feeling such a way about anything. Think held the man in utmost reverence as she deflected the attack that followed.

Unlike gods, Dwarves definitely existed, but they were an unquestionably lower form of life. They had incredible physical prowess befitting their poor intellect, but not to the extent of those piece of shit Werebeasts. Dwarves were unable to use magic without catalysts; they couldn't multi-cast or even approach the level of Elf magic.

This clashed with Think's aesthetics. She hated incompleteness more than anything else. In her eyes, Dwarves were essentially lower than fungus. So how incredibly ironic that the rites Dwarves engraved into their spirit arms provided her a spark of inspiration.

“_____!!!”

Lóni swung his greatsword into the earth, only to let it go. As soon as she saw his hands slide down the hilt, she realized she wouldn't be able to react in time. She gave up on the two spells she was casting and used a third one she had on reserve.

An instant later, Lóni split his greatsword into two short swords and sliced

where she had just been. She watched from behind Lóni as the air he slashed through instantaneously froze and began to break apart. Had she chosen to try to cast her original spells for even a millisecond longer—had she not chosen to demi-shift, she would've perished in that moment. A cold sweat dripped down her back.

Engraving rites into catalysts allowed the Dwarves to deploy them instantly. This let them to get an edge on the Elves, who had to compile their rites first.

In which case, Think needed to figure out what to do after they had their edge.

She activated three rites: one to demi-shift behind Lóni, and two she had cast just before demi-shifting—Material Fract and Elemental Ray.

His twin short swords, which were inscribed with freezing and decomposition spells, shouldn't have been able to withstand Think's magic...

“—*Ha...ha-ha!*”

...but with a hearty laugh, he kicked the greatsword impaled into the ground and grabbed the knife that flew out. By the time Think saw the knife, Lóni had chucked his two short swords—now combined into one—behind himself, toward Think.

Think didn't know what to make of these supposed short swords, but she managed to dodge the incoming knife and prepared to counter with the Reflector rite she had compiled.

She had cast two spells in front of him, and a third, Reflector, behind him just now. Reflector would amplify the first two spells. That included whatever spell Lóni had engraved into his knife.

He couldn't defend himself or dodge this attack. Think was certain she had him this time.

“_____?!”

But she instead followed her gut and cast Reflector not behind Lóni—but behind *herself*!!

A split second later, she felt the impact of a massive energy in that very spot.

The Lóni who had been standing before her slowly dissipated as her eyes finally processed what was happening: The Lóni she'd seen was an illusion created by residual light. Meanwhile, behind her—

(Did he just demi-shift to where he threw his blade—?!)

—Lóni held the blade Think had deflected in one hand and swung his knife with the other, a fiendish grin on his face. He was swinging away at the reflection spell she had cast on herself.

It goes without saying that spirit arms are only capable of using seal rites that have been engraved in them beforehand.

That meant using multiple catalysts at once allowed the wielder to cast multiple spells at the same time as well. But this didn't even remotely count as multi-casting. Using multiple spells at once meant nothing if the spells didn't boost one another.

That said...Think observed Lóni's elegant, smooth movements thanks to her accelerated version of time. She looked at his hands and the swords they gripped: what should have been the twin short swords engraved with freezing and decomposition spells.

Now combined into a single blade, they became a demi-shifting anchor point. Then...*snap*.

Think watched as it separated into hundreds of knives. That was when she noticed something that wasn't supposed to be with him.

The greatsword planted into the ground behind her—had actually demi-shifted with Lóni.

“—!! Encryption Shift: In Carrion—!!”

Think shouted, activating the seal rites inscribed on her hands and forehead. She instantaneously altered the two rites she had been using to expand her point in time, extending their effect to the space around her. The two resulting spaces collided and caused an inaudible explosion that shattered the sky and the black ash raining down from it.

———,

That very same moment, Think cast a spatial distortion spell to create a makeshift shield. It wasn't enough to completely defend her from the impact, and she was sent flying, skipping across the ground like a stone over water.

Now covered in sand, ash, and soot, Think looked up in anticipation of a counterattack ...and found Lóni on his knees. It appeared he hadn't made it out of the explosion unscathed, either.

He was looking at his spirit arms, many of which had been reduced to dust, and laughing. Think began laughing as well; she finally took in everything that had transpired in their brief interaction.

The next moment, Lóni reached for the hundreds of blades scattered in midair. With incredible skill, he began juggling the knives, recompiling them into his greatsword. Their numerous seal rites fit together like pieces of a puzzle; it was an incredible feat much like multi-casting.

Before long, he recreated the effect Think's spatial distortion spell had on their surroundings—

This was the true form of his spirit arms—a weaponized art form.

The scene moved Think Nirvalen; this opponent of hers was a work of art.

The spirit arms were nothing much by themselves, and this fact didn't change in the hands of any other grubby mole.

Even duocasting while speeding up time wasn't enough to bring her to his level.

His reflexes, decision-making, and the speed and accuracy with which he could predict what was coming—they exceeded his Dwarven capabilities. This man, her enemy, was an anomaly, a living art.

“Truly incredible... Why, you're the perfect opponent for a geeenius like me. ♪”

“...? *Gaaah-ha-ha!*”

Think couldn't help but respect Lóni. He sensed that from her tone, even if he had no idea what she was saying. The same amount of respect for Think was reciprocated in Lóni Drauvnir's laughter. He paid respect where it was due.

After all, the creation of spirit arms was only possible through copying magic pioneered by the Elves—no...pioneered by Think. They followed the same formula of casting a basic rite first, then changing it depending on the situation to cast the desired rite.

Lóni continued staring at Think with a spark of respect. He closed his eyes—and lowered his stance, spirit arms in hand, as if to tell her:

—*This next attack will be my last.*

Ah... At this rate, there was no way Think could win. This was clear to Think Nirvalen from the very start. She knew she couldn't defeat Lóni Drauvnir.

That is—she couldn't defeat him *alone*—!!

Think looked behind Lóni to the steel airships encroaching upon the forested capital. It was just as she'd planned since the day he'd defeated her—not a moment went by when she didn't think about it, even in her dreams.

Every last detail, from where he was standing to the airships' positions, even the color of the sky and smell of the wind, was exactly as she'd imagined.

Think spread her arms wide and announced to Lóni with the most devilish of grins:

“Why—it's tiiime for our showdown. ♥”

It was time for her to unleash the five trump cards she had hidden. Her grin grew more twisted as she summoned her first card. She shot a spell into the ground below her as she called out for the first rite of spirit-breaking.

It was the name she had given the thorny columns she had created:

“—**Vá lu Anse**—!!!”

Something immediately blossomed under Lóni: a giant water lily that refracted light as if it were made of water. Its petals engulfed him too quickly for him to react.

He had been imprisoned with the most beautiful death sentence the world had to offer. All he could do now was watch everything unfold around him—



The steel fleet of aerial warships slowly homed in on the Elf capital as they laid siege upon it. It was enough to throw anyone into despair, but Nina watched from atop her roof with a bashful smile. She watched as the future Think had designed came to fruition and recalled a dumb question she'd asked Think several times.

It was about their four trump cards. Well, *five*, according to Think.

In any case, the four rites of spirit-breaking that Nina knew about were to be used on this day, at this time, in this current scenario—no, scratch that. This was all part of Think's master plan from the get-go, something she'd laid out piece by piece.

—It was all for Lóni Drauvnir.

—With the one and only purpose—no exceptions—of killing him.

Think had steered the War in this direction. She spent all her time and energy into setting up this situation for her lone goal.

"I kept asking why she hadn't used them yet... My stupidity knows no bounds," Nina said.

A trump card isn't a trump card unless it can't possibly be trumped. And when your opponent is at your level or higher, there is no such thing as a trump card.

—Unless you trap them with your secret trump card...!!

Nina watched from afar as the long-awaited moment finally arrived. She saw the signal for their showdown—for her to unleash the trump cards she had been sitting on for so long. As soon as Think played her first card—

Okay, let's see who will put an end to this War—who will come out on top and win the game. Let's see if you've read our four-card hand.

I can't wait to see what look you'll have on your face...Lóni Drauvnir—!!

—Nina crowed to herself and hustled deep down into her mansion's basement. She began casting the rite sequence for activating their second trump card lying dormant within the massive underground hall.

Nina Clive activated the second rite of spirit-breaking in Think Nirvalen's stead. She called out the name of the dome with its manifold engraved seals:

“—Ziá La Anse—!”

Immediately after the words escaped her lips, the dome released a repulsive death knell from beneath the Clive residence. The sound passed through the capital, the forest, and bent the sky itself—and the moment this eerie cry reached its limits...

The world fell silent.



...It was as if the planet itself had perished. The ominous shrieks spread out from the city and could be heard by any in the vicinity for about a tenth of the continent. Anyone who heard the shrieking and howling also heard the silence that made it seem like time itself had stopped.

There was a simple reason for this: All spirits within range of this one rite had been temporarily erased from existence.

—Fixed Second Guard—Ziá La Anse.....

A ninety-nine-fold rite of spirit-breaking that operated on the Old Deus Kainas’s protection. In simple terms: a spell that deactivated magic. The theory behind it was simple as well. Instead of channeling spirits from the spirit corridor, this spell created a magical explosion by feeding off nearby airborne spirits. In the same way fire consumes oxygen in order to burn, Ziá La Anse consumed spirits for fuel.

For a brief moment, the wind stopped, along with the endless rain of glimmering black ash. The steel airships fell victim to gravity and inertia and came tumbling to the ground—

That’s right... All magic, all rites—anything that used spirits was deactivated by Ziá La Anse. And by the same token, Ziá La Anse also ceased function immediately after being cast.

—How strange that the Dwarves managed to keep so many hunks of metal... their armada...aloft. Or rather, from a structural standpoint, the fact that such large vessels could hold themselves together defied the laws of physics. The question was: What would happen if these ships could no longer rely on spirits—that is, magic—to function...?

The answer was unfolding before Think's very eyes.

The ships began to implode, and fell to the earth like miserable bugs at the end of their short life spans.

I wonder what kind of expression my little flower prisoner has right now?

...Ah, that's it.

That's the face I wanted to see——!!

“~~~~?! ~~~~?! ~~~~!!”

Lóni screamed frantically with his eyes wide open while Think smiled in ultimate bliss. It made no difference what he was actually saying—his expression was more than worth it.

He was astonished, amazed, panicked.

That's the sort of pathetic expression you have when faced with something unexpected! I knew it. I could feel it. I never doubted it. It was just as I imagined. And, well, quite frankly: Of course he'd never see this coming! It's written all over his stupid face!! The world is in the palm of my hand; the time is nigh to destroy it and win this little game! the Elf genius thought as she leaped forward.

The man let out a lone scoff. Nothing more.

With his ships falling from the sky, and Think fast approaching him, he realized she was no longer speeding through time. Despite all the confusion, he managed to figure out that all magic had ceased functioning; it was quite incredible. He did all he could do. He tried to power his way out of the flower prison with his greatsword.

Lóni swung his sword faster than Think could perceive it, but to no avail...

“—Argh?!”

Aw, too bad. You caaan't cut this flower.

Lóni was further shocked when his sword ricocheted off the translucent petals. Think continued walking toward him with a smile on her face.

“Why, don't get too hard on yourself. You made the righhht choice considering the situation you're in. 🎵”

Anyone would *normally* assume the massive floral structure was one of Think's magical creations. A single Elf couldn't possibly summon something this gargantuan—at least, not under *normal* circumstances. Without access to magic, the structure shouldn't be able to withstand a strike from Lóni's sword.

Yes—*normally*. *Typically*. Under *most* circumstances, that was accurate.

But not this time. Nothing about this trump card—the thorns buried beneath Lóni's feet—was normal.

—Fixed Second Guard—Ziá La Anse.....

An eighty-six-fold rite that operated under the protection of the Old Deus Kainas.

Think used the thorns in Nina's basement to demi-shift the structure here. Who could have ever figured that out—that the water lily bud was neither summoned nor transmuted, but teleported to this very spot?

How could Lóni have ever guessed that this floral prison was Think's third trump card?!

And yet—no, even more so, Think felt a deep respect for her foe.

“.....”

It was the way he had positioned himself: He was completely still, on one knee as he put all his focus into the spirit arm at his side. All his preparation, only to be outdone and fall into a trap—and yet, he knew what he had to do. He knew if he was going to make it out of here alive, he had only one chance—that his window of opportunity would be impossibly short.

There was no way for him to know how long Ziá La Anse would last, but he knew it wasn't forever. It seemed like it wouldn't last that long, either, given that Think was now running toward him. He knew she was going to finish him off the moment magic could be used again. He figured with Think's rite-compiling abilities, he would have a tenth of a second to react. The instant she began casting, he needed to cut her down, along with this floral prison, all in one fell strike.

The maneuver was simple in itself, but actually pulling it off would be nothing

short of a miracle. He didn't think about that, though. He looked straight at her, his blade ready to thread the needle.

As Think ran toward him, the faintest semblance of light began to manifest at her fingertip. They were about to exchange strikes—

“Ooooh, seal rites? Why, how useful. Mind if I take credit for thooose?”

But his blade never left his side...

“If you prepare them ahead of time...the spells caaast themselves. ♥”

Think was positively jubilant. Her sprint had been a bluff. She was now walking elegantly toward Lóni.

“.....*Ha..... Ha-ha-ha-haaa—!!*”

His blade crumbled in his hands before he could swing it. He looked down at it, surprised...and began laughing. On the inside of the water lily prison—engraved directly into each of the petals of her third trump card—was a single phrase. His roaring laughter shook the entire budding flower; he must've noticed what was written there and what it meant.

What else could he do but laugh? It's not like he could cut the petals even if he wanted to. The translucent water lily bud swayed back and forth elegantly, never to bloom again. On the inside, in very fine print—so fine he needed to squint to make it out—he saw the phrase.

It was written in Dwarvish: “Why, go fuck yourself.”

Lóni Drauvnir, the man who had been on Think's mind for all these years. Think Nirvalen, the woman who pitted herself against the Dwarves' greatest genius of all time—she poured every ounce of her burning passion into carving a seal rite into the flower's 137 petals. It was a gift made especially for him and him alone.

The only flower of its kind in the world, a glass lily that would bloom for but a single moment—

—Mortal Third Guard—Ag Ni Anse.....

A 137-fold rite that operated under the protection of the Old Deus Kainas.

Nina had already activated the spell, but it was deactivated by Ziá La Anse. Their fourth trump card, it had the ability to break down virtually all spirit-based beings. It was what happened to his spirit arm. The magic within the budding flower had taken effect. Its real purpose, however, only had an effect on Dwarves, and was activated by the saying the lily's word in the language of flowers.

In other words, it would set off a chain reaction within Lóni Drauvnir, destroying the very spirits that made him. He was going to go out in a glorious blaze of his own spirit particles; his death was inescapable.

What is the flower word for lilies, you ask...? Why—it's "destruction."

Think had no reason to run. All she needed to do was walk up to the flower, touch it, and say its flower meaning. The only reason Think chose to run was to make Lóni use his spirit arm, break it, and eliminate any chance of him turning the tables. It took her the three rites of spirit-breaking, an intensely deep conviction, and borderline insanity make this situation possible.

She wanted to see Lóni Drauvnir dead. Completely, utterly, unquestionably. Anyone who dared scoff at this glorious endeavor didn't know Lóni's value nor Think's yearning.

Lóni, who stared far off into the horizon as he continued to laugh incessantly, caught sight of something new. Something he had been looking for. It was the way to control the Phantasma—Think's fourth trump card.

The Dwarf ships were helplessly spiraling toward the capital.

Had the anti-magic spell worn off before they hit the ground, Think could have set up barriers to keep them away from the city. By the look on Lóni's face, he had finally realized why she let them get so close in the first place.

"A looot of your friends will be going down with you, so you won't feel lonely.
♥"

I'm not going to tell you how I did it. I'm going to watch you die with only the knowledge that you lost to me. The thought crossed Think's mind as she laughed to herself.

Áka Si Anse was at critical mass within their test furnace. Even at 20 percent

full power, it was enough to turn Melryln's center into a crater.

So what if it cost a city or two? Getting rid of the entire Dwarf armada and every living soul who bore witness to the spirit-breaking rites was more than worth it.

It was a deal too good to pass up. And she wasn't going to.

Lóni didn't have a way to understand everything that was happening, but he had a good idea of what she was trying to do.

"...Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Lóni looked like he was thoroughly enjoying himself, but he also couldn't hide his frustration. He began saying something in the Dwarven tongue.

It was a truly disgusting, crude language; a blight on the ears.

"Well done, woman. I enjoyed our little game. So what's your final trump card?"

Taking a lot of liberties with the translation, Think gathered this was what he was trying to communicate.

She had actually taken the time to study the moles' awful language. She smiled as she responded.

"Why, I won't reveal that until the veeery end... I'm not telling. ♥"

She thought about her fifth and final trump card, which was actually her first, as well as the only and biggest reason she was able to match Lóni.

It was the knowledge that she couldn't beat him on her own.

Think, the one true genius, knew herself. And she likewise knew it was impossible for anyone to really know themselves. So she found someone who didn't know her and knew they never *could* know her, but would still believe in her all the same—

(I have a suuuper special trump card, but youuu won't get to see her. ♥)

Think kept the thought to herself as she touched Ag Ni Anse and began to utter the word "destruction," a final "up yours."

Nothing would be left of Lóni once this spell was deployed; the word was

about to leave her lips, when...

“—**Ouchie.**”

...before Think could get it all the way out—before Lóni could meet his death—the two of them instinctively froze.

They saw a little girl who had fallen from the sky—an “ouch” had ended their battle.

The same anti-magic spell that had felled the Dwarven fleet had brought someone else with it—and that someone had a bump on her head.

It wasn’t a little girl, strictly speaking. It wasn’t even a living thing. It was in every sense of the word—a weapon.

“ ♥”



This smiling creature; this irregularity— Yes...

The worst conceivable thing appeared with the worst conceivable timing. The greatest enemy of all, one that couldn't be beaten with ingenuity or strategy.

Something of a divine disaster—



...These things happen sometimes. You could put a ton of effort into living the healthiest life possible, but it could all be for nothing if you die young due to an untimely accident. This is what happened to Think and her master plan. An accident in the shape of divine punishment fell from the sky.

So what did Think feel when faced with the unfortunate reality that a Flügel had just fallen from the sky like a comet and landed smack-dab in the middle of the capital?

“Why, there’s a margin of error for everything. I can’t be getting down on myself for every little mishaaap. ♥”

Think laughed it off as a marginal error.

Truth be told, destroying the capital along with the Dwarf armada had been part of Think’s plan from the get-go. It just so happened that instead of her doing it, a *little chicken* passing by fell from the sky in the form of a meteorite and did it for her. These things happen. Like how the defensive barrier cast by three thousand of the Elves’ most powerful mages did nothing to stop the destruction of the *entire* city...or how the Dwarf armada, which had been falling to their death anyway, disintegrated from a *mere shock wave*...or how that *little comet* murdered the surviving Elves and stole their entire library before going on her merry way...

Such miscalculations are just part of the planning process!!

It didn’t matter, though. Think effectively got what she wanted. At the end of the day, the entire battle was only a small part of her greater plan...

“Excellent! Why, this has been a big step in accomplishing my mainnn goal—to end the Great War! I’m glad things are moving without any trouble. ♪”

“Yeah... You’ve got nothing to worry about, Elder... I’ve...I’ve always believed

in you!!”

Nina had to hold back tears of admiration for Think, who was in an unreasonably good mood. Who cared about how much damage the Elves suffered, or their loss of all magic-related knowledge?! Nina certainly didn’t! It was nothing compared to the days when Think kept everything a secret from her!

Everything we did for all those years—the many strings we pulled! The many victories we saw to fruition!

It’s nothing compared to finally putting Lóni Drauvnir in his place—!!

“You had him right where you wanted him...then *wham*—everything taken away from you in the blink of a Heavenly Smite—! I can’t believe how strong you are...to be able to get back on your feet in just twenty-four years of shutting yourself off from the outside world. I’m almost moved. I don’t think I could handle the— **Whoa?!**”

They were at the outskirts of the new capital in Melvoil—the capital had been moved from Melryln after its destruction—in Nina’s new home that had been built twenty-four years ago. This was the first time Think had used the estate’s hot spring, and the first time Nina had seen her since moving into this new home *twenty-four years ago*. Nina’s cries for help echoed through her estate as she was ravished by otherworldly tentacles, a favorite summon of Think’s.

—————.....

The extent of the Heavenly Smite unleashed that day reached the battlefield where Think and Lóni fought. Think realized immediately that she needed to drop everything and demi-shift to get to where Nina was. This led to a confrontation with an even younger version of the nightmare from the sky, from which Think and Nina were barely able to escape alive. The gem on Think’s forehead burned out from magic overuse, and she nearly perished by the time they got to Melvoil. The moment they set foot in the capital, they received word that Lóni had washed up ashore *still alive* after he and Think’s Ag Ni Anse had been dragged out to sea...

Immediately afterward, Think became a recluse in Nina’s basement, never to show herself again. Nina tried her best to convince Think to come out—but she

never held Think's behavior against her. A few times a day, she would bring meals and written reports to her door. A few times a day, she would collect an empty tray and Think's written orders.

I knew she would be back on her feet in no time! She's so strong! I'm so glad I kept up the act as the Grand Magus. Same with all those erotic novels I bought for her! I've even managed to avoid her overtly sexual orders for the past twenty-four years—!!

Compared to how tough it must've been for her to come out of her rut, this is nothing!!

Otherworldly tentacles pumped their aphrodisiac ooze into Nina's skin, which only made her all that much gladder to see Think.

"Your sheer courage is an inspiration! I can hardly believe you haven't bathed in twenty-four years with all that matted hair, and even though the ghastly smell is enough to make me **gaaaAAAH!!**"

"Urrrgh, it's been sooo long since I spoke with anyone, I'm having a hard time making out what you're trying to tell me... Why, were you saying something about wanting a tentacle pounding? ♥"

"It was a slip of the tongue!! I was just going to say your fragrance smells as beautiful as always— **GYAAAH!!**"

Think must've dialed up her magic, because the tentacles' assault intensified. As much as Nina resisted, she could feel them fondling her in all the right places. Perhaps it was the resulting rush of blood to her head that brought her back to her senses with an audible screech.

Same old Think? Same old tentacular antics? —Not even close.

The fire in Think's eyes and her magic had kicked up a notch or ten.

...Although I would've rather realized this without the help of Think's interdimensional sex noodles.

Nina frantically tried to cast a spell to keep the aphrodisiac from overtaking her completely while Think went back for another soak in the hot spring and said:

“Niiina, you didn’t really think I’d become a recluse just because I made a little mistaaake...?”

No, not in a million years. I know you’ll get your revenge on both the Flügel girl and Lóni—that you’ll kill them even if it’s the last thing you do, Nina thought the moment she saw the intense fire in Think’s eyes.

“Why, I’ve got nothing to worry about. You dooo realize—I’ve never failed even once?”

Nina gulped at Think’s bold and arrogant claim: *A true genius never fails.*

“Life is but a series of tests—and my inevitable viiictory just needs a *teensy* bit more of them. ♥”

Think chuckled to herself and held her hand aloft to produce a small image. It showed what she had been working on in the basement all this time—the successful result of her tests.

“—Kú Li Anse.....”

The fifth rite of spirit-breaking. Think told Nina of its fearsome abilities, and Nina immediately understood:

Ah... Lóni’s unsuccessful defeat and the sudden Heavenly Smite really were nothing more than the smallest of marginal errors...

It certainly wasn’t good that the Dwarves knew about the four other rites of spirit-breaking.

The loss of the Elven capital, the destruction of the Dwarf armada... These were devastating for both camps. With the Elves and the Dwarves at a loss for resources, they needed to find a new way to wage war. The result: Various races formed alliances with other races to keep the fighting going.

Where did this bring the Great War? Battles took on a new strategy: Gather as many of your enemies as possible into one place and destroy them in one large attack. This was seen as the new way to end the Great War—to bring an end to the game. The key to victory was this one final move: Kú Li Anse.

“My path to viiictory is going as smoothly as possible. ♥”

The fate of the War was still very well in the palm of Think’s petite hand.

The transcendent smile on Think's beautiful face sent a shiver down Nina's spine.

"Pardon—?! AaaaAAAH— **GRLGRLGRL?!?!"**

The tentacles suddenly disappeared, and Nina fell into the hot spring. Nina feared she would drown for a moment before she cleared her nose of hot spa water, only to pull herself together the moment she received a chillingly poignant telepathic message from Think:

[...Why, there's...something in the house...]

Nina focused on the situation at hand; she knew it had to be serious.

Something had made its way into their home.

Think didn't know who or what it was.

[Are they here for me...or you...?] Nina asked.

Whatever it was, they both knew it wasn't friendly. So the question Nina had was—*who* were they after?

One would assume Nina, right? This was where she, the *Grand Magus*, was known to reside, after all. The *real* Grand Magus lived in her basement, and even she couldn't tell who had made their way inside.

[.....I'll go... You stay here,] Think replied after a moment's hesitation. It was her way of saying, *This is going to get dangerous, so you stay put.*

Think transformed completely—her facial expression, her tone, her mannerisms—as she quietly got out of the hot spring, and with a snap of her fingers, she was fully dressed. Nina nodded deeply.

Who was this intruder here for? No—who did they know what about, and how much did they know?



Nina could tell that Think was going find this out for herself and silence the intruder for good...

“...How do you do? I’m afraid I’ve made myself at home.”

There sat a ghost, his face twisted in a smile that reached his dark, unsettling eyes.



...Then, when a stupefied Nina witnessed this unbelievable sight—

“E-Elder! You sure I shouldn’t follow it...? No, *let me* follow it!!”

She leaped out of the shadows, intending to go after the so-called ghost as it made its exit. Nina had no idea what *it* was, nor would she have any reason to. Think’s silence, and the palpable hostility in the air, spoke volumes. It was clear that *she hadn’t gotten an ounce of information* from this visitor.

Whatever *it* was, it toyed with Think as if she were a child. Whatever *it* was—it was incredibly dangerous!! And yet...

“...Niiina, what did that look like to you...?”

“You’re asking me...? How would I know if *you* don’t even know?!”

Nina practically screamed her answer but proceeded to gulp audibly when she noticed Think’s gaze, which asked:

Does that look like someone you should be following?

Nina had unconsciously hesitated to go after the intruder—and the dangers that would have followed. Think’s gaze had stopped Nina in her tracks. Those eyes had halted her from impulsively giving chase. They were what kept Nina’s resentment, humiliation, and loathing in check.

Nina took a deep breath and thought for a moment before speaking.

“...Whatever it was, I *think* it may be playing the same game we are... At least, that’s what it looked like to me,” Nina mumbled as she tried to make sense of what had just occurred.

Think, who had her head down with her cheek on her desk, waited patiently for Nina to continue. The ghost wore tattered rags and pelts—it was hard to

make out whatever it was. Nina and Think had both witnessed the ghost; they heard its voice, watched its gaze and how it carried itself. They both knew this ghost was a player, and a formidable one at that.

Nevertheless, there was something off about the ghost. Nina couldn't quite put her finger on it... Or rather:

“...I doubt anybody knows what that *thing* is.”

Nina was sure of herself this time. She looked into Think's eyes and thought:

Whatever that thing was—it really must have picked up that I was hiding behind the pillar. Which means it's capable of seeing through an octa-caster's disguises.

No one should be able to do that, let alone *have any reason to!*

Some more time passed, and Nina told Think what she thought about the entire exchange.

“I think they're playing the game with a *different set of rules...*”

Think Nirvalen was trying to win the War by destroying the planet. The same probably went for Lóni Drauvnir as well. No—in this world where even the gods went to war, everyone fought for largely the same purpose... But as for that ghost...

“They are aiming for an entirely different kind of victory—I...think...”

They weren't here to kill anyone, or claim victory for their own. Even Nina knew it didn't quite make sense, but for whatever reason, she was certain:

This ghost was the third player.

She recalled a fleeting anxiety she'd had once before, about another player who paid no mind to how the others played the game; someone who would end the Great War on their own terms—

“Mr. Ghost is after something a lot simpler than thaaat...” Think smiled big for Nina, who was quivering in fear. “Why...he's trying to do the exaaact same thing I am. ♥”

Think's plans... Nina had just listened to what they were: Form an alliance

with the stronger races, team up against their common enemies—pit the entire world against Artosh, the creator.

Once she had them all in one place, she would use Kú Li Anse to wipe her enemies off the face of the planet. There was just one little difference, Think went on:

“He’s pitting everyone’s trump cards agaaainst one another—his win by default through mutual destruction. 🎵”

Learning of the E-bomb, a weapon that detonated the ether of the Old Dei, came as a great shock. Even more so if it really was the Dwarves who managed to create a weapon so lethal. The biggest surprise, however, was that it could overpower Think’s Áka Si Anse. Those damned moles—if they weren’t willing to learn their place, then they needed to be eliminated from the planet.

“It only helps us if Mr. Ghost and his friends add fuel to the fiiire. ♥”

Minor details aside, Áka Si Anse had been used out in the open—it was public knowledge. Lóni Drauvnir was bound to create something to rival it; Think expected as much. Hence why she was in such a hurry to prepare the fifth rite of spirit-breaking—

—Eternal Fourth Guard—Kú Li Anse.....

A 607-fold rite that operated under the protection of the Old Deus Kainas. It was the ultimate defense—a sealing spell that ceased all spiritual function.

Theoretically, it wasn’t possible to bypass the membrane created by sealing the spirits on multiple planes of time and space. Not the Flügel’s Heavenly Smite, nor the Dwarves’ so-called E-bomb, and not even Think’s very own Áka Si Anse could do that. This fifth rite of spirit-breaking, the ultimate shield—it was impervious to any and all existing damage. Thus, the war would come down to a battle of raw firing power, with Think and Nina the only survivors... At least, that had been the plan—

“Why, there appears to be...another victory ahead...” Think whispered to herself with a tinge of chagrin. She began to walk away, but then turned.

“Bring it on... Just another race to exterminate ♥,” she taunted with a wretched, bloodthirsty grin on her face. “We still have one mooore trump card:

Kú Li Anse.....”

Is it just me, or...? Nina thought as she scurried her way out of the room behind Think.

“Why, I look forward to seeing whether Mr. Ghost can control us as well as he thinks he caaan. ♪”

Although Think scoffed at the notion, it was evident that she lacked her usual boundless confidence.

“E-Elder! Wasn’t there one more trump card you said we haven’t used?!”

The fifth trump card, their ace in the hole... Nina never learned what exactly it was, except that it wasn’t another rite of spirit-breaking. She worded her question to sound more like a suggestion to use their fifth trump card. Think twirled around and, for but a moment, smiled in frustration—

“I already used it. ♪ This is the first time I’ve hoped that it doesn’t work. ♥”

She poked out her tongue as if to say, *I’m never gonna tell you what it is!*



On that fateful day, Think Nirvalen went outside and gazed aimlessly at the sky. The warm sun beamed down on her; it was so warm that it almost made her sleepy.

All her long ears could hear was the sound of grass swaying in the wind, which only made her sleepier.

Her diamond-shaped pupils witnessed the answer to a question she’d asked herself for ages.

The sky was a deep, captivating blue color. Beams of warm, white light shone down upon her. Something had bested all warring parties, including the Elves and the Dwarves. Towering along the horizon was a gargantuan chess piece. Think chuckled to herself at what seemed like a joke.

Apparently this was the real color of the sky. With the unending Great War now over, the world had become so utterly beautiful... It was laughable—almost like a dream—but Think realized what this meant.....

She had lost.

.....Oh, not agaaain. How could I lose yet again...?

Even as the thought lingered in her mind, she felt neither shock nor anger.

I knew it.

She knew her biggest trump card would prevail... The *very card* Think had put all her faith into was standing next to her, seemingly in a trance:

“...Um... Elder...? Mind telling me what’s going on...?” Nina asked as she sank to the ground, dumbfounded.

Think was in the middle of asking herself the same question before she realized the answer. She looked at everything happening around them, and she knew. It was simple, really.

“The worrrld was destroyed. Basically...someone beat us to the puuunch... 🎵”

They had lost the game. It was as simple as that. Think got to her feet after answering Nina’s question. She began walking with her usual elegance, and for a moment, she caught sight of the *ghost* off in the distance.

This self-proclaimed ghost was apparently some monkey called an Immanity. And he, along with an Ex Machina, had magnificently pulled all the strings to the very end.

And thus—

—the planet *alone* was destroyed...

Thus, the Immanity’s desire to win the War without killing anyone—the contradiction that was his mission—had been accomplished. Think was embarrassed by her own incompetence.

I wish I’d thought of that...

Destroying the planet was much quicker than destroying each and every one of the races. Think could almost hear the ghost telling her this, and she could offer no response.

...But there was one thing she refused to concede, something she was sure of now that everything was said and done. She gazed up at the azure heavens.

Why would a victory of this nature decide the throne of the One True God?

“Ohhh... I’m such a fool... I caaan’t believe I ever thought that windbag Kainas would be of any use.”

No one said anything about a rule like thaaat...

Think cursed the worthless god incapable of communication in any shape or form. Think *hated* herself.

Just what are Old Dei...?

It was far too late to consider the question now, but if her hypothesis was correct...

That was the biggest reason for her defeat, her most foolish oversight. Think heaved a deep sigh and lamented:

“We should have killed that worthless piece of shit Kainas from the very staaart.....”

“Wha—Elder?! Sure, that’s true, but you shouldn’t be saying that out loud!! Aren’t you afraid of divine punishment?!”

Nina tried to silence Think, even though she’d just unwittingly agreed with her.

Yes, that was the old way of things...but not anymore. Think remembered what the cocky new “One True God,” the snotty brat who had just rewritten the rules of the world, had said, and continued:

“Why...as a creator, do you have any right to sentence your creations to death if they defy youuu? That’s like saying it’s okay for a parent to kill their child just because they didn’t listen. Why, I always thought the only throne our shitty little god Kainas deserved was made of porcelain. ♥”

She really laid it on the Old Deus. She’d wanted to get all this off her chest for years—and she wanted to check a certain little something. Still panicked, Nina started walking with Think—until a figure appeared before them.

It was a man shouldering a recognizable mass of metal.

“Ló...Lóni Drauvnir—?!”

Nina's breath caught in her throat as she shouted his name.

The two main players of the Great War identified each other.

In the very next moment, Think Nirvalen unleashed her latest and most advanced magic.

Lóni Drauvnir likewise unsheathed his new and improved spirit arm.

It was the most natural of actions. Like a contract, or a vow. They both unleashed their most powerful attacks, the earth crumbling beneath them as they ran at each other with all their might to fulfill their promise of destruction—and yet, before they could even make contact...

...the new laws of the land unequivocally denied their exchange:

1. In this world, all bodily injury, war, and plunder is forbidden.

Apparently this new set of rules—the Ten Covenants—was real.

Any blows Think and Lóni tried to land on each other, any magic meant to harm—was forced to yield. All magic that would lay siege to the spirits—no, to any member of the Ixseed—was forbidden, nonexistent.

I see...

The Elf and the Dwarf, each of them the strongest of their kind, shared an uncomfortable laugh before they turned and went their separate ways.

There was nothing to say. The Great War—their own personal *practical war game*—was over. It had been ended.

And as mere losers, it wasn't their place to question the winner. In which case...

"Niiina? Find me some of the best Elves you know—why, we've got a country to maaake."

"Oh, okay! 🎵 Wait... **What?! A c-c-c-country?! But why—?!**"

At first, Nina responded without thinking, but within an instant realized what Think had asked her to do. Think continued: Not a single Elf knew what was going on. This crisis was an opportunity she couldn't pass up. This was the

perfect chance to *split the Elves*—and gain independence. Furthermore:

“If we wait for our incompetent god to start the game, we’ll only fall behiind.
♪”

Time was of the essence. Spoils were going to whoever could get their team up and running first. An opportunity for sure—but a predicament to end all predicaments. The Elves needed saving, and who was Think to deny them?

Sure, she’d lost a war. Time to start a *new one*.

The practical war game between her and Lóni had moved on to the next stage.

It was now an abstract war game—here in Disboard, this new world on a board.

No one really knew how the Great War had ended or by whom. And Think had no obligation to tell anyone. Why squander this advantage by leaving any written records? If anything, it was downright convenient that the laws of magic were kept under lock and key. Without magic, every single race was in chaos. But Think had already rewritten the laws of magic, *twice*. Just gotta do it one more time, and what’s a better time than right now—right here—?!

She was going to kill them all, no matter what. No matter how many hundreds, thousands of years it took—she vowed to get it done. That goddamn mole, that rat with wings, that monkey, that bratty One True God—they were her quarries. Like hell she would let anyone take them away from her. Think gleefully pondered all the tasks she had to do...

“...Um... I can’t go on much longer... I need a break...”

...only to be met with a tuckered-out Nina. She had put her everything into winning this war, and it ended in defeat. And what’s the first thing she hears from her partner’s mouth? *Talk about the next war?*

While Think may not have technically been the *only* genius of her caliber, she was still a genius, and she knew herself. Nina lacked Think’s unyielding thirst for blood, a form of genius in itself. Of course she was heartbroken.

“How about we play a little *game*—by the Covenants? ♥”

And thus, Think Nirvalen proposed the first post–Great War game...

“If you can build a country within the time limit, you wiiin.”

...based on the Ten Covenants.

6. Wagers sworn by the Covenants are absolutely binding.

Think smiled at Nina while she watched her slowly recall this new world’s laws.

“Niiina, what should I wager in exchange for your assistance in my little war gaaame?”

“.....Elder...!”

Think was hiding something in that smile. Nina let out a small gasp.

She was grateful beyond words. Think may have lost the War—but she was going to win the next...and she needed Nina’s help to do it. So Think was asking what Nina wanted in exchange.

Does she mean...anything?

After a brief moment of consideration, Nina gave her answer:

“In...in that case— W-w-will you...marry me?!?!”

.....,

.....Heh... Eh-heh... Hee-hee-hee. Niiina... Oh, you...

Think was moved. She was waiting for something along the lines of having to be Nina’s slave, or perhaps some revenge for all those times she’d violated her with interdimensional tentacles.

“...Why, I never pegged you as a liberal girl, Niiina. I guess we’ll have to make same-sex marriage one of the tenets of post-War Elven Gaaard.”

“Oh, um—! U-um... Okay, so...I—I—”

Think had always known of Nina’s feelings for her. She never really...*understood* what it meant to love someone, though, let alone... marriage?

Marriage: two partners united, swearing to stay by each other’s sides until

death do them part. Thinking about it logically, they were basically doing that already.

“Ah, w-well, that’s perfectly fiiine! I never cared for such stupid, antiquated conventions anyway, and, if I were to get married to youuu—why, I’m a genius, so I kind of saw this comiiing! I already created a spell that lets two women procreate, and, uh—oh, wait. I need to rewrite that one in accordance with the new laws of magiic. Just gimme about fifteen miiinutes. ♥”

Think wasn’t as cool, calm, and collected as she usually was. She began recompiling the rite as she rambled on. Think didn’t know why her face had gotten all warm or why she couldn’t meet Nina’s gaze. No, the real reason she’d suddenly become such a shrinking violet was...well, you know...

But never mind that. Nina steeled her every last nerve to make what might have been the most important announcement of her life:

“Uh...E-Elder—I’m actually a...guy...”

=====

.....Heh... Eh-heh... Hee-hee-hee. Not again, Nina... You and your jokes. ♥

You know how easy it is to catch such lies with a simple anaaalysis spell. Here, just give me a moment—aaand... There! ♪ Just like that! I’ve got my magic up and running again! I really am a geeenius!! I meaaan...I did technically lose the War, but, um, I think I did a pretty good job at—

“So, Nina Clive—you had me tricked this entire tiiime?”

The analysis spell came back with the answer “Male.” It was as if upon hearing her partner’s confession, her emotions had left her body like steam, only to be frozen back into her when she learned of Nina’s cold betrayal. Usually, there’s a liquid phase for these kinds of things.

Think’s broken heart began shutting down in self-defense, and she took a step forward.

Thanks for everything.

I’ll repay you with a quick, painless death. It’s the least I can do.

Think, now cloaked in a cataclysmic amount of magic, took another step

forward, then another. She was closing in on Nina, who realized that he didn't have much longer to live, so he did the best he could to try and convince her to spare him.

"It w-w-wasn't a trick!! That is—I never once had a chance to say I was a man!"

"So you *neeever* told me a single lie...? If you have a better excuse than thaaat, why, you'd better hurry uuup and tell me. ♥"

"I tried to tell you several times, but you always cut me—"

"*Tried to tell me...?* Was thaaat while you wore women's clothes...while you enjoyed washing *every inch* of my body? ...Anything else to saaay? ♥"

"I never did anything inappropriate!! I even withstood your aphrodisiac sex tentacles while you were naked—if anything, you should be impressed!!"

As death closed in on Nina, he thought: *I'm just glad I held it together...*

He continued his mortified wailing—and then Think stopped. She was pondering something, cycling through her memories. Just to be sure, she asked Nina a question:

".....So you were just being yourself this entire tiime? And nothing about you made me think you were a boyyy?"

"_____As a man, I know it's kind of pathetic, but...yes..."

The tears that had built up in Nina's eyes began to roll down his cheeks. Think smiled as bright as the sun.

...She thought about how cute his face was, how small his quivering shoulders were, and how feminine his voice was.

No matter which way she cut it, Nina was a girl to her. Then so be it.

"It's not pathetic. After allll, you *are* a girl. ♥"

As soon as the statement left her lips, a rite Think had composed while they were having this conversation lit up the air around them—only to stop soon after.

"...Oh. Why, it seems nonconsensual *sex changes* go agaaainst the Ten

Covenants... Hmph!”

“Wait a second—were you about to change my sex without my permission?!”

Think smiled awkwardly as the first Elf to receive the Ten Covenants’ protection shrieked.

“So be it. Niiina is Niiina. Male, female—I suppose it doesn’t really maaatter.” Think, not exactly sure how to feel about all this, continued with a bashful grin. “...I accept your terms. If you wiiin—”

That grin was enough to captivate anyone.

“—I, Think Nirvalen, pledge to become your wiiife.”

Nina stopped breathing for a moment.

“—Ah... Y-yes, ma’am! All right!! I’ll get you a country up and running within the time limit, no matter what!!”

Moved to tears, Nina was champing at the bit to get started on their game. Then Think added:

“And if you lose, you’ll become my wiiife. ♥”

“Okay! ...Wait—what?! I have to wager something, too!!”

3. Games shall be played for wagers that each agrees are of equal value.

“So, uh, if I want you to be my wife, I have to potentially end up being *yours*? ...You call that *equal value*?!”

If he lost, he got a magical sex change. Think watched Nina as he tried to make a case for how messed up this entire thing was, and whispered under her breath:

“...Why...I guess I’m not the type of girl worth chaaanging your sex over...”

She smiled in self-deprecation and drooped her head.

“S-so...about this time limit you mentioned...” Nina began. “What else did you have in mind for a...new country...?”

Had Nina realized setting up the terms was a part of the game that was this

new world? He asked his question with an earnest expression, to which Think replied:

“We’ll need at least two cities and their respective administrations, plus an agent plenipotentiary. 🎵 And for a time limit, let’s saaay—”

Then, as if testing the waters, she mumbled:

“—two years...”

“T-t-two years?! Don’t be ridicu— Uhhh...I mean—!! For you, Elder, I’ll see to it that it’s—”

Nina’s reaction was proof he was the ultimate trump card, something he himself didn’t know. Think chuckled to herself as she finally dealt her beloved trump card.

“...maximum. ♥ You have one year and eleven months! Good luuuck! ♥”

“Wha—noooo?! That’s literally not possible!! Give me a break here!!”

Nina was up in arms about only a month’s difference, but Think ignored his quibbles. “Sooo, in two years, we’ll be husband and wife, or wife and wife. Here, raise your hand like thiiiis. 🎵”

With the same bashful smile, Think raised her hand—and Nina made his wager. He was touched, in a way. After all, Think had effectively accepted his marriage proposal, though there were some technicalities with the gender depending on who won. He’d either be her husband, or end up her wife. While the notion of the latter was still quite frightening...

...the winner of the game had already been decided.

Perhaps without ever realizing he was the one who held the bargaining chips when they decided the terms of their bet—Nina raised his quivering hand in agreement.

But that was how things worked. One can never truly know themselves. Just like how Think Nirvalen didn’t know herself.

Nina Clive was no different—he wasn’t capable of knowing himself at all. So all he could do was...know the person who knew him best. Trust them more than he trusted himself.

For Think...that meant the first person she'd ever shown a genuine smile.

“—Elder...why do you always force your smiles?”

Think hadn't really known what smiling was, or that she had been forcing one. Nina had taught her that.

If Nina believed it possible, then it must be possible. The same went for Think. Whatever Think believed possible must be possible. She'd make it possible—no matter what it took.

Conversely, once you chalk something up as impossible—it won't possible no matter which way you slice it...

The day Think met the ghost and believed she could do nothing to stop him—
—that was when she should have forfeited the game.

She should have given up the moment she *wished* for Nina to fail. It was the moment her defeat was set in stone...

...Nina was different, though. He didn't know any of this. Think had never told him. All she had to do was say, “There aren't many people who can pull off being a Grand Magus with nothing but some orders written onto flash cards.” Nina could do anything Think knew he could do. The opposite was true, too—anything Think thought to be impossible, she *personally made impossible*.

Think would probably tell this to Nina...someday. She smiled.

(You don't reveeeal your trump card until the showdown. ♥)

Thus, the curtain closed on the practical war game and opened for a new world: an abstract war game.

Think Nirvalen and Nina Clive took deep breaths. Who would end up a wife? It was a trivial wager, but of utmost importance to those involved. This marked the start of their secret plan that would eventually result in their country engulfing a third of the continent. It all started with a pledge:

“Nooow—let the game begiinn. ♥”

Their ultimatum decided, they both faced this new world before them and declared a rematch:

—*Aschente*—!!

THREEFOLD LEVITATION

Take any major incident, and you'll find that the cause is usually something trivial. This was another one of those cases—many such cases. It started with an exchange of words between everyone's favorite royal-siblings-who-refuse-to-work and the girl they were forcing all their work onto.

—Steph, you're such an idiot.

—I don't want to hear that from a deadbeat like you.

Et voilà! You have yourself a shitshow that will unfold over the next five days.

—.....

Day Three—The Dead of Night

The Kingdom of Elkia, currently transitioning into becoming the Commonwealth of Elkia.

A loud scream inappropriate for such a late hour could be heard throughout the Elkia Royal Castle.

“Why—?! Why can't I ever wiiiiin?!”

Crying with her face buried into the rug was the redhead who had just been called an idiot. The poor girl, Stephanie Dola, had just been bestowed the *honorable* title of chief minister by the two siblings who refused to help with any of the Commonwealth's never-ending flow of tedious bureaucratic tasks.

“Can't help ya there...”

“...Nope...”

The king and queen—brother and sister—eyed her disinterestedly: Sora, the black-haired, dark-eyed older brother, who wore his usual “I ♥ PPL” shirt; and Shiro, the white-haired, red-eyed younger sister, who took her usual seat on her brother's lap. She was wearing a pair of panties on her head.

The one on the floor was Steph, who, in an attempt to prove she was in fact not an idiot, had spent the last three days playing a game against the king and queen—the world’s strongest gaming duo known as “ ”. In case it wasn’t already obvious, she had lost. Not just once, but many times, at different games.

—Well, technically, “ ” hadn’t beaten her; it was Sora, the one who had called her an idiot.

“This doesn’t make any sense! I’ve kept up with your tricks, and I even tried using them against you. Why can’t I win?!”

Steph really wanted to beat him at something. She wanted to make him take back what he said about her being an idiot. She wanted him to help, you know, actually run the country. For the past three days, she would work during the day, then go to Sora and Shiro’s room to challenge them to different games, but she had yet to eke out a *single victory*.

That brings us to how we got here, with Shiro wearing Steph’s undergarments on her head.

Steph knew she couldn’t beat “ ”, but wouldn’t it be okay if she could at least put up a fight against Sora? Was that too much to ask for?

Evidently, it was—Sora had dominated her in every game they’d played over the past three days. It was just absurd. Sora looked at Steph, who was still sobbing—and, on a whim— “...Hmm... Well... Maybe I could show you a thing or two... Y’know...so you don’t suck so much...” he offered.

From atop his lap, Shiro looked up at her brother and let out a small sigh.

—*You coulda just told her* I’ll show you how it’s done! Don’t give up hope yet!

Nonetheless, Steph peered up at Sora from the floor and listened to what he had to say.

“I’m sure you know how important it is to keep a poker face during a game, right?”

She answered his question with a sort of pout. *With that question, he really does think I’m an idiot, doesn’t he?* Steph went to make a retort, but Sora cut

her off before she could.

“Truth is, a good poker face only gets you so far. After that, they’re *totally pointless*.”

“...Pardon?”

Well, what should I do, then? Steph’s gaze begged, to which Sora responded:

“In the world we came from, there’s this thing called microexpressions. The Immanity, Flügel, and Werebeasts all show them, too.”

“Microexpressions...?”

Steph realized he was introducing her to a new word, a new concept. She immediately got up off the floor and produced a pen and paper, ready to take notes. Sora, who seemed to be enjoying all this— “In our world, there’s a famous psychologist named Paul Ekman.”

—began to explain this special skill off the top of his head in great detail, no tablet needed.

“According to him, everyone—regardless of how and where they were raised—exhibits brief, involuntary facial expressions that divulge their true emotions. These instances, which last less than 0.25 seconds, are called microexpressions.”

Sora chuckled to himself—he’d already mastered reading people’s faces by the time he could walk and talk. When he first learned about this hotshot scholar’s theory, he thought, *Who does this guy think he is?*

But Steph, who had no way of knowing what Sora was thinking, was taking note of everything he said. He shook his head and smiled.

“You also see this same thing in races other than the Immanity, for whatever reason. In my old world, people learned how to detect lies by studying other people’s microexpressions. As they say: ‘The eyes are the windows to the soul.’”

“W-wouldn’t that mean you’re basically reading their mind?!” Steph looked up from her notebook and shouted.

That would rival magic—or at least the Werebeasts’ enhanced senses. The techniques running rampant in the siblings’ previous world frightened her.

Smirking, Sora shook his head and continued: “They’re not quite that omnipotent... All you can pick up from a person’s facial expression is what they’re feeling...like, for example—”

He hit Steph with a question—a very sudden question.

“Steph, you like going commando, don’t you?”

“Wh-whaaaat?! Not a chance in hell I do!”

She took a brief pause before denouncing his assertion at the top of her lungs. But Sora noticed something— “Wait, what? ...Seriously?” Sora, surprised by the answer to his own question, continued with a series of *ums* and *uhs*. “You pick up on just their emotions... You have to see how they *react to certain questions* —”

Basically, Sora’s sudden question had been a test to see what kind of microexpressions Steph showed. But maybe it wasn’t a good idea to share his findings. He hesitated for a moment, but pressured by Steph’s inquisitive stare, scratched his head and went on.

“Your first microexpression showed embarrassment. On its own, that would mean you were embarrassed by the question, but when you shouted, instead of your eyebrows lowering and getting closer together—which would show anger—they went *up*.”

What this means, is...

“You were *shocked*—as in, *How did he know I—?*”

“Wrong, wrong, WRONG!!”

Steph, now flushing scarlet, rushed to deny Sora’s claim. Sora watched this reaction as well, let out an “Oof...,” and took a step back before continuing: “This time, I saw joy and arousal...and not an inkling of anger... Man, Steph, you’re nasty...”

“.....So Steph’s, actually...a raging...masochist...?” Shiro wondered softly. She was reading a book and still had Steph’s panties on her head. Steph stopped herself from shrieking once again. She bit down on her lower lip—another telltale sign of embarrassment.

“S-so, basically, on the very off chance—the *impossibly* off chance—that what Sora says is true...”

She wasn’t going to admit he was right about her, but if what he said about microexpressions was true...

“...then by reading people’s faces, you can tell if someone is lying, the same way the Werebeasts can?!”

If that were the case, she definitely wanted to learn how to do it, too—unfortunately...

“Nah, not possible.”

Steph slumped over, her hopes dashed. Sora plopped Shiro back on his lap.

“Like I said, the only thing you can tell about someone from their microexpressions is how they *feel*. And microexpressions are involuntary and extremely brief. Sometimes the person making the expressions doesn’t even know why they’re doing it. So it’s important to *see what they do after the fact*—like with you just now.”

Steph furiously jotted down more notes and said:

“You were wrong about me, though. Definitely wrong about that! So you’re watching how I’m reacting now?”

She asked as if he hadn’t spent the last eight years of his life doing nothing but play games. Shiro wasn’t as adept as her older brother at reading people’s faces, but even she rolled her eyes at how readable Steph was, and whispered: “...You freaked out...twice... That means, he...hit the nail on the...head...”

“Who cares about that?! Sora, tell me how it’s done!”

“Who cares about that?”—those were the magic words. Steph had ignored Shiro and pressed Sora further.

“Sure, I can show you, but you should know—it’s super hard to do.”

“Hit me with everything you’ve got!”

Steph was committed to jotting all this information down. Sora snickered, then began listing everything he knew while he played a game with his younger

sister seated on his lap.

“Let’s start with *joy*—if their smile lasts longer than four seconds, it’s fake.”

“Huh?”

“On the flip side, even if that smile lasts just an instant—if the outer corners of the eyes don’t lower, that smile ain’t real. You can tell it’s real if their cheeks and lower eyelids lift. But if they do this with only one of their eyes, it’s a sneer—a sign of contempt. You can’t tell who they’re sneering at just with microexpressions, though. The object of their loathing could even be themselves. So——”

—

“...Want me to keep going?”

“No... No more...”

Sora had noticed Steph had already filled the contents of her notebook just with information about joy. He could see she was down for the count. She’d finally realized that she probably wouldn’t be able to read a person’s expression in under 0.25 seconds in the first place. Nonetheless, Sora could tell she was still highly interested in the technique, and with a chuckle, he continued: “Sure, reading faces is pretty hard to pull off, but preventing someone from reading your face is easy enough.”

Very easy.

“All you need to do is hide your face.”

Steph rushed to her feet, practically glowing. “I see! That’s something I can practice straight away!!”

All I need to do is hide my face! Steph thought. The wide, unwavering smile plastered across Sora’s face only made what he was about to say sound even more like a slight against Steph.

“You sure can. Then, all you’ll have to worry about is your tone and gestures.
♪”

“.....Right... I almost forgot you were this kind of person...”

It was the same old show—Sora would pick you up, then drop you flat on your

face. *Is it really that fun to toy with people?* Steph wondered. She knew his answer, too: *Yes. It is.*

Steph glared at Sora, who actually went on to continue his explanation in impressive detail.

“Tone and gestures aren’t as instantaneous as microexpressions. Werebeasts can hear your pulse and blood flow, but otherwise, it’s pretty easy to trick a race like the Immanity.”

I see, Steph thought with a secret grin. She could use this against Sora—who acted as if he actually *was* reading her mind. He was indeed reading her expressions this entire time, just like he said he could. With a sarcastic chortle, he went on: “Just so ya know—these techniques will do jack shit against me.”

“U-ugggh...”

Steph fell silent after picking up that Sora had been reading her this entire time. He was the one who was telling her all this information in the first place. It was a bad idea to play against him at his own game when he had pretty much spent his entire life doing this. Steph sighed before she realized something.

“Also...” Sora’s expression grew dark, and with something of a self-deprecating tone—he gave Steph a warning. “...I wouldn’t try to pick this up if I were you. It’s not as nifty a trick as you’d think.”

“.....”

Shiro slumped over without a word—she knew exactly what her brother was getting at. It was possible to be able to read people *too much*.

“...Huh? Why is that...?” Steph asked.

Steph was the quintessential good girl. Meanwhile, the young man she was looking at had an air of self-loathing to him as he patted his sister on the head—a hint of jealousy could be heard in his quick laugh.

“...Nah, you’ve got nothing to worry about, Steph. So what do you want to play next?”

Sora’s smile was brazen; he and Steph played a series of games until the sun had risen, with Steph eventually reduced to covering her naked body with a

single bedsheet...

Day Four—The Dead of Night, Yet Again

Usually, Steph would make her entrance by practically kicking down Sora and Shiro's door, but today, she was much calmer and more collected. She knocked on the door, then entered the room slowly. It was as if she had already won the game they were about to play.

"It's time to get my revenge. Are you ready, Sora?"

Sora and Shiro stared at Steph, who was being much more brazen than usual.

"I'm...probably the last person who should be asking this question, but..."

"...Steph...have you, been...sleeping...?"

"You two are *certainly* the last people I want to hear that from! Now get up!"

Sora and Shiro were used to staying up late at night. They were pretty much nocturnal from the start. Steph, on the other hand, had spent the past few days completing her work as Elkia's chief minister, while her nights had been spent... playing games with Sora. The bags under her eyes had grown darker since the previous day, but in a way, her vitality was almost commendable.

Alas, her efforts would be all for naught. Why, you ask?

"Today's game is simple," she said.

Unbeknownst to Steph, Sora and Shiro had seen the game she was going to propose from a mile away.

"I've hidden a *certain something* somewhere in the castle. If you can find it, Sora, you win!"

Steph loudly proclaimed the rules of her challenge. Shiro moved to put an end to it the moment it started, but Sora shot her a look, which stopped her.

"Oh-ho—? A 'certain something,' you say...? Can we at least get a hint?" he asked.

"I left a note saying 'found it' on the thing I hid. That way, no one can cheat and claim otherwise! Heh-heh."

Steph was brimming with confidence. Sora lowered his head so that only

Shiro—in her usual spot on his lap—could see his face. After all, anyone would be able to tell from his expression how much he was dying to say: —Yeah, I already know exaaaactly what and where it is!!

But his nerves of steel helped him restrain himself—and he asked what he imagined would make the game much more interesting.

“...Do you care *how* I find the whatever I’m looking for?”

After many years of being together, it wasn’t hard for Shiro figure out that her brother knew how Steph was going to respond.

“No, no! We can’t have you bringing Izuna or Jibril to sniff out the item with their enhanced senses or magic. You need to do this game on your own!”

Just as he’d expected. The smile on Sora’s face made that clearer than anything. He was leading her on.

“*On my own*, eh...? Also, I’m assuming I can’t win by just *telling* you where it is, right?”

“That goes without saying! You can search anywhere you like, but I’ll be watching you to make sure you don’t get anyone’s help!”

It goes without saying?

It certainly did. He’d be able to just say a handful of random places to fish out the answer; it also made sense that she would follow him around. It was so obvious, it was almost silly. Sora, a wicked smile on his face, gently lowered Shiro from his lap.

“Okay, I think I get it... Man, I really don’t wanna do this...”

Shiro watched her brother poorly feign reluctance as he stood up, and whispered:

“Brother...you’re...such an, asshole...”

“Shiroooo! Don’t say something so cruel! Otherwise I’m gonna hang myself!” Sora screeched, on the verge of tears.

“...My bad... That was...way harsh...”

Shiro was genuinely sorry about what she had said, but knowing what her

brother was about to do to Steph, she still meant it.

“Shiro! Steph is the one who decided on this game and its rules! My hands are tied! Or what, are you saying it’s okay for me to lose?! *Oompf—?!*”

Shiro was used to his antics after their eight straight years of gaming together.

“...Brother... No, funny business... Denied...”

That was all she needed to say to keep him from pulling anything sleazy. Sora visibly stiffened, his despair palpable. Even with the wind taken out of his sails somewhat, he managed to activate the pervy parts of his brain to come up with a new, although not quite as interesting, idea.

“Aw, fine... All right, Steph, gimme your hand.”

“Hmm? Huh? Pardon?”

Puzzled, Steph placed a hand on Sora’s outstretched palm.

“I’m gonna show you something fun. You ready?” He lightly gripped her hand and grinned from ear to ear.

“Steph—*tell me where the thing you hid is.*”

“...Wh-what?”

Why would I tell you? Steph almost said aloud, but Sora was ignoring her. He didn’t actually intend for her to tell him anything. Instead, he started moving her hand around gently. Up, down. Left, right. He appeared to be checking something—then, after throwing a few feints in there— “Whoa?!”

He led Steph’s hand under her skirt.

“While it’s painfully unfortunate that Shiro isn’t gonna let me fish it out of there myself...”

Sora heaved a deep, chagrined sigh. But he knew he was right.

“Take out whatever it is you’re hiding *in your panties.*”

“_____”

The only emotion on Steph’s face was shock. She did as she was told and removed a note with the words “found it” written on it. Sora looked at the

note, then at Steph, and grinned.

“Looks like I found it. Chalk up another win for—”

A shell-shocked Steph loudly interjected before he could finish his sentence. “How—?! How did you know where I hid it?!”

She even wondered if he’d used some kind of magic.

“Steph, what would you do if someone asked you to show them your underwear drawer?”

“I—I would say no... Isn’t it obvi—? Oh...”

Steph picked up on something, just like Sora knew she would. Steph was by no means an idiot. On the contrary, she was quite smart. *That* was what made her so easy to read. A real doofus is unpredictable; you can’t rely on them to make logical decisions.

“Yup. When I brought your hand somewhere you *didn’t want me to put it*, I felt some resistance. No matter how much you try—actually, the more you try to stay away from the spot you don’t want me to find, the stronger you resist. Basically, if I ask you to show me where the secret spot is, it’ll be wherever your hand shows resistance. It’s a cheap kind of psychology trick.”

Steph’s eyes went wide, but Shiro interjected:

“...He’s, lying...” She stared at her brother; she knew he wasn’t telling the whole truth. Why, you ask? “...He knew what the game was...and where the card was, the entire time...”

“Wh-what?!” Steph shouted. She couldn’t believe her ears.

Sora simply nodded. “Yeah... You normally come bursting into our room, but today, you just sauntered in... It was pretty obvious you were *trying hard not to drop something*.”

Steph opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Sora ignored her and sat back in his usual spot, which was in his chair with Shiro on his knee. He went on: “Plus, it was only yesterday I told you about microexpressions. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know you’d try to figure out a work-around. You looked so confident—you weren’t even hiding your facial expression. That means you

knew you wouldn't give any signals *no matter where I searched.*"

It's a simple enough explanation. Sora would've picked up on any work-around Steph came up with, and that would've led her to lose by default. If she was so confident that her expression wouldn't give away what trick she was using, then she just *didn't have to use a trick*. What's the point of a trick if you aren't going to use it?

"The trick was the treasure in your treasure hunting game—as long as the note was on your person, you wouldn't make any microexpressions no matter where I looked."

Had Steph hidden the note somewhere in the castle, she knew her facial expression would give its location away if Sora got close. This was even more evident since she'd just learned about microexpressions yesterday. She needed to stay with him to make sure he didn't cheat, and she had to maintain the same facial expression no matter where he searched. There wasn't a better spot than on her own person—furthermore...

"Steph, I genuinely think you really outdid yourself this time. You had the note on you, but you didn't stop there! You knew a virgin like me wouldn't just straight up violate you, especially with Shiro present... So you chose a spot that was hard for me to search! Man, you were *this* close...but—"

Sora was truly impressed, but—

"—it wasn't enough."

Steph had lost the game *the moment she entered the siblings' room*. The realization brought her to her knees. Shiro took one look at Sora's smug expression and whispered, "...Brother...you're still, lying..."

"Hwha...?" Steph felt her soul leaving her body. *How deep do the lies go?!*

"...That's...not even, the real point..."

"Right, something changed halfway through. Steph—*wanted* me to find it."

"Huh? What are you even talking about—?"

Both Sora and Shiro knew she had hidden the treasure on her person the moment they saw her first thing that morning. They just didn't know *where* on

her person she'd hidden it. Sora used this as an excuse to conduct a wholesome cavity search—at least, that was what he'd originally meant to do.

But he was thwarted by Shiro and forced to begrudgingly make a quick change in plans.

“Steph, remember that little psychology trick I just mentioned? The one where the closer I get to the treasure, the more you resist?”

“Y-yes...?”

“You didn’t resist no matter where I moved your hand.”

“____Huh?”

“It kinda threw me off for a second. You didn’t resist even when I moved toward your lower half.”

Now, how best to explain this?

“I was faced with two possibilities!” With utmost fervor, Sora enthusiastically held up two fingers high above his head. “One! I wanted to find a place where you could have hidden the note so confidently after using microexpressions to your advantage.”

Sora lowered one finger and continued:

“Normally you’d flip out at me if I tried to grab your panties. But this time you didn’t, so—”

Shiro interjected from atop Sora’s lap and gave it to her straight:

“...Steph...now you’re just...*too* self-aware...”

—.

_____.

“N-no... NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Steph screamed as she ran red-faced out of the room.

.....Meanwhile, Shiro mused:

“...Brother... Steph actually...put up, a good fight...today...”

“Agreed. She even took our relationship into account—she’s getting better.”

Sora seemed proud of Steph as he chuckled to himself, to which Shiro responded with a somewhat miffed expression, "...But I'm...way, better..."

"Yes, my sister. I know. Still...if she can outdo me without getting as messed up as I am, then—"

He stopped there and just watched the direction Steph had run off to with a grin on his face.

Day Five—Evening

A ghostly figure roamed the corridors of Elkia Royal Castle.

"...Maybe I really am a pervert..."

It was Stephanie Dola—Shiro's words had really taken a toll on her.

She'd gone five whole days without any sleep, and she had just been called a pervert by an eleven-year-old. She deemed Sora and Shiro as weirdos and losers when she herself was possibly the biggest pervert of them all. The uncertainty was even affecting how she walked.

"Kinda lookin' like a goddamn ghost there, aren'tcha Stuch? Please?"

She heard the voice of the Eastern Union's former ambassador: Izuna Hatsuse, a young Werebeast girl—she looked like she was still in the single digits age-wise—with black hair and fennec fox ears.

Steph looked at Izuna with lifeless eyes, like she was witnessing an illusion.

"Is that...Izuna...? Heh-heh-heh...it is, isn't it? Perfect timing..."

If what Sora said was true—that you could tell the difference between conscious and subconscious by looking at someone's face—maybe she could use this Werebeast's enhanced senses to figure out where she stood on the pervert spectrum. Sora must have been teasing; there was no way Steph was actually a pervert. A smart, and pure, young girl like Izuna should be able to tell her the truth!

"Izuna...could you tell me whether what I'm about to say to you is the truth?"

Izuna must have picked up on Steph's condition from her expressionless eyes.

"...Stuch, you seem really outta it, please. Just say the word and I'll do what I

can for ya, please.”

Izuna was ready to help Steph with whatever she needed. She was so hyper-focused on listening to Steph’s next words—just short of activating her bloodbreak ability.

Steph straightened herself up and finally spoke:

“—I’m not a pervert.”

.....

.....

Izuna didn’t know what the word “pervert” meant, but she knew it probably wasn’t something Steph wanted to be. She paused for a moment, wondering if she should tell the truth, but Steph had asked her to say whether or not she was lying, so— “...Sounds like a damn lie, please.”

Izuna answered her honestly, which caused Steph’s body to go limp.

—.....*Heh-heh.*

———*Heh. Heh-heh-heh. Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.*

“.....Yup, that’s right. It’s true. I knew it would be... Thank you, Izuna. 🎵 I feel like a load has been taken off my shoulders. 🎵”

“Are ya sure, please? Seems more like a load of bullshit, ple—”

Izuna’s words were lost on Steph. Her head was somewhere else, and she began dancing.

“I owe you one! ♥ I know! I’ll make you allll the fish you want later as a thanks. ♥”

Izuna didn’t know why, but something seemed off. All the fish she wanted? Normally, she’d be over the moon at the idea, but—maybe it was her Werebeast instincts—Steph sounded like she was reading out her last will and testament.

“...Uh, S-Stuch! Never mind, please! You’re no damn perv, pl—”

Izuna’s eyes began to tear up. She knew that whatever a pervert was, it had really upset Steph. She tried to take it back, even going so far as to tell a lie—

something she hated doing—but it never reached Steph’s ears. She skipped through the castle before eventually disappearing into one of its many corridors...

Day Five—Late That Night

“HYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

As always, the gamer siblings gamed into the deepest depths of the night—so late that even nocturnal animals would be concerned. Someone had kicked down their door with a mighty shriek.

—It was, well...a pervert.

No, not a *perversion*. A reallive pervert.

She wore a pair of panties stretched over her face in a fashion reminiscent of one friendly neighborhood pervert—Hentai K*men. Her clothes—well, lack thereof—were limited to extremely skimpy underwear, and her eyes were hidden behind colored sunglasses. She had gone full hentai.

“...Uh? Wait...is that—Steph...anie?”

Sora was so shocked by what he saw, he accidentally used her full name. He and Shiro froze stiff as a board.

But Steph (?) paid them no mind. She responded with impossibly high energy:

“I have finally awakened to my inner self!”

“Uh... I mean, you’re probably just running on too little sleep—”

Judging by her voice, Sora was able to determine that the woman was probably Steph. The woman (likely to be Steph) continued to ignore him.

“Sora—you are a pervert!!”

“Yeah, can’t argue with you there.”

“And Shiro—!!”

With enough fervor in her voice to cut through steel, the woman (possibly Steph?) spoke even louder.

“Like brother, like sister! You—are also a pervert!!”

“...I can, live with that...”

Shiro didn't have any reason to object, so she probably was in fact a pervert. The woman (we believe to be Steph) grew more and more enthusiastic with her (seemingly random) claims.

“Then it stands to reason that the secret to being a good gamer lies in... being a pervert!!”

I've figured it all out—that was what her expression probably showed. The panties and sunglasses on her face made it hard to tell.

“Steph...you're clearly exhausted. We know what we did was bad. We'll start doing our fair share of the workload, so please get some—”

“I'M CHALLENGING YOU TO OOONE LAAAST GAAAAAAME—!!!”

Nothing they said could ever hope to reach her. Images of everything Sora, that awful pervert, had done to her flashed through her mind. She was going to bet her everything, and she wanted only one thing in return—!

“For our wager—! If I win, Sora—you need to fall in love with me!”

She added a loud snap of her fingers, which echoed pitifully before eventually settling into a deep silence. A profound sense of mercy overcame the two siblings as they watched Steph.

“Steph... You should really just go to sleep. Look, we're sorry. We didn't mean to push you this far.”

“...Steph...get some...well-deserved...rest... You'll be, back to normal...in no time...”

They were begging her. Sora sounded like he was at a confessional, and Shiro was in tears, but their words were lost on Steph.

“And if I lose—you two can do whatever you want to me!!”

Yes—Steph was thinking clearly (one would assume) now. She finally knew what she needed to defeat Sora—no, “ ”. The very thing she had been lacking.

It was the resolution she needed to win—!

She needed to play on their level—!

Was it crazy? Perhaps! Was she indeed a pervert? If that's what it took, then so be it!

She didn't need her sanity; it would only prevent her from beating these two siblings. What she did need was borderline insane amounts of concentration and willpower—any other emotions were superfluous. Sora realized this as he watched Steph, and covered his face with his hands.

"Hey, Shiro..." he mumbled. "What should we do? She's *reached her truth* through the most screwed-up methods possible."

"...I think she's...broken... Is this...all, my fault...?"

Shiro, likely having felt responsible for all this, clung to her brother with tears in her eyes. He stroked her hair as he responded: "No, Shiro. This is all *my* fault. You've done nothing wrong."

Sora then gazed at the (perverted version of) Steph, who stood before him.

"Heh-heh-heh... What's wrong? Are you afraid? I'm not the same girl I once was! I'm a new version of myself—I'm neo-Stephanie Dola! I feel like flying—flying my foot into your face, that is! Heh-heh! If you'd like my autograph, you should ask for it while you still can!"

They could tell that Steph (what was left of her) was losing more and more of her marbles by the minute. Sora secretly face-palmed and thought: *She's so close.*

Steph was *on the right track*. The *perfect* track. This tinge of crazy was exactly what she needed to get on his level, but...

It was all for naught if it led to a mental breakdown.

"...Fine. Challenge accepted. I'll take responsibility for pushing you over the edge."

Sora got up, but not before Shiro pulled him aside for a moment. "...Brother... Steph is, way stronger...than usual... *Eight times*, stronger... So, eight normal Steps..."

"I have no idea how you got those numbers, but one thing's for sure—this is gonna be tough..."

Sora knew it was what needed to be done. He turned and faced the hentai. He didn't have his usual air of boundless confidence about him this time—instead, it was the same intensity he would show whenever he went up against Shiro. You could tell from this aura he was giving off that he was going to play her with everything he had.

“Steph. Steeeeph—can you hear me...?”

“Oh-ho-ho? Are you looking for an autograph? Or perhaps a game? Or maaaybe you're after something a little more intimate—”

“A game. No objections to the wagers. So...what game do you want to play?”

—The time has come, Sora, virgin, eighteen years old. Steph knows your little tricks and strategies. She's going to get on your level this time. Let's see how well you do against *someone smarter than you*.

One thing's for sure—

“Very well—let the game begin!”

Steph locked eyes with Sora, and he could tell—

Steph's gonna give Shiro a run for her money as the best opponent ever.

Sora licked his lips, and a bead of cold sweat ran down his spine—but he was still smirking with glee.

—————.....



“.....H-huh? I...”

“Hey, you're finally awake.”

“...Welcome...back...Steph...”

Steph woke up to Sora and Shiro staring at her. She looked around and realized she was on the bed—er, futon—in their room.

“S-Sora? Shiro? Huh...? Why am I sleeping here...?”

—*Sleeping...? Was I asleep?!*

“—?! How long was I asleep for?!”

Steph kicked her blanket off her as she tried to get up, but Sora calmly, gently reassured her: “You weren’t asleep—you passed out. From overwork. Don’t worry, you were only out for one day.”

—*One day?*

Steph turned white as a sheet. “*Don’t worry,*” *he says?* That meant she’d skipped out on several meetings and other work-related tasks.

“You don’t need to worry about work, either... We took care of everything for you... Actually, we just finished up.”

“...*Nod, nod.*”

“—Come again?”

Did Sora and Shiro actually work for once? Not just any work—but Steph’s work?! What could be more preposterous than leaving these two to govern a country, even for a minute—?

“I know what you’re probably thinking. Everything’s all right, though. Shiro and I couldn’t make a dent in your daily workload alone... We ended up needing help from Gramps, Izuna, Jibril, and the Shrine Maiden just to get through it all.”

“.....”

For some reason, this made Steph a little depressed.

“So you’re free for the next couple of days. Get some more sleep, will ya?”

“B-but—”

Steph realized something she probably should have a long time ago: Politics were *her* specialty.

It was the one thing I could do better than anyone else, and yet, these two—

Sora picked up on her train of thought and interjected:

“Shiro and I asked Jibril for her help, and even then, the three of us couldn’t manage. I don’t think we’d have gotten a single thing done without Gramps lending a hand. We suck at politics.”

—Sora wondered: If he and Shiro were any good at it, maybe they wouldn’t have had as many problems in their original world. Shiro continued where her

brother left off.

“...But...we managed...somehow... So, Steph...please get some more...sleep...”

Unbeknownst to Steph, Shiro’s eyes showed a tinge of fear. Perhaps it was because of how frightening Steph (in her super-hentai mode) had been during her game with Sora. At this point, Shiro wanted nothing more than for her to sleep. Sora, meanwhile, looked away and began scratching his cheek.

“I, uh...guess it was wrong for us to push all the work onto you. But, to be honest...Steph, you’re the only one who can do this kind of work—who can run a country full of different races. I originally thought that between me, Shiro, Jibril, Gramps, Izuna, and the Shrine Maiden, we’d be able to finish up about a week’s worth of work for you...but three days was the max we could do. So, uh...”

Steph could tell from the siblings’ tired faces that they’d been working nonstop the entire day she was asleep.

“—Nice going, Steph. Get some rest. Can’t have you passing out on us again.”

“...Steph...major props...to you...”

.....

Steph, now fully wrapped up in a blanket, looked at Sora with some hesitation.

“S-Sora...”

“Hmm?”

“Y-you don’t *actually* think I’m an idiot, do you?”

“Nah, you absolutely are.”

“—I—I...see...”

“Yeah. You’re a massive idiot—so much so that I respect you for it. I mean, you’ve gotta be an idiot in order to handle that kinda workload.”

“...Oh...”

“Anyway, get the rest you need, and when you’re back on your feet...how about you bake up some sweets? You haven’t done that in a while.”

“...Steph...you make...the best...sweets...”

“...I think I’ll do just that...”

An exhausted Steph covered her face with the blanket. She had a lingering feeling as if she’d just been through a literal nightmare—but it quickly dissipated, and she fell back asleep.



—Once the two siblings made sure Steph was fast asleep: “...Phew, looks like everything worked out somehow.”

“...Mm... That was...a close one...”

Sora had just barely managed to eke out a victory against Steph (with her unleashed inner hentai), which meant that he now owned her, body and soul. His orders had been simple: —*“Forget everything that happened today until you can figure out how to do the same thing without forgoing sleep or going batshit crazy.”*

Then he returned her bodily and mental autonomy so that she could get more sleep. That was it.

And yet—

“...I still...can’t believe, you won...Brother...”

It was a really close match, enough to make Shiro admit it. Steph’s tactics were completely different from Shiro’s, and they were definitely new to Sora. Both siblings acknowledged her prowess.

“I’m just lucky she was running on no sleep. I don’t think I would’ve been able to put up a fight against her like that if she were in tip-top shape.”

The tone of Sora’s voice suggested he’d enjoyed his match with Steph. Shiro puffed out her cheeks, slightly miffed. But she couldn’t disagree with him. The Steph he played against had...snapped, to say the least. Under the normal rules of the Ten Covenants, Steph wouldn’t have gotten to choose the game she challenged Sora to, and yet, Sora accepted her terms. Even if she ignored this small handicap, it wasn’t hard for Shiro to tell that Steph and her brother were playing at pretty much the same level.

“If she can trigger whatever she did last night without losing her marbles again...things are gonna get real interesting.”

Shiro could see how much her brother was enjoying himself.

“...Then, we’ll...have to play, against her...as Blank...”

“I’d rather play Steph one-on-one. If she can beat me at my own game—”

Sora looked straight into his sister’s eyes and brandished a lethal smile.

“—I’ll just have to *beat her back*. Maybe then I’ll be ready to finally take you down, eh?”

Another smirk surfaced on Shiro’s face at Sora’s provocation.

Just when everything appeared to be said and done, Steph began talking in her sleep.

“...Zzz...zzz... Oh... You want to take me for walk...naked...? Oh no... Ha-ha... those darn...Covenants... Well, off we...go, then...zzz...zzz... Ohhh, everybody’s watching...”

“.....”

“.....”

They both couldn’t help but wonder: *Is this the real Steph?*

For Steph’s sake, they pretended not to hear what she’d just said.



ONE PAIR OR HEART STRAIGHT FLUSH

“...Wow... This is so pretty...”

A black-haired girl stood on a shore on the outskirts of Clive, one of the fifty-two states of Elven Gard. Void of any emotion, she stared at a small seashell that rested in her palm.

The girl was Chlammy Zell, eighteen years old. She worked for the house of Nirvalen, a prestigious Elf family—more precisely, she was their slave.

That day, she was sent on an errand to pick up a parcel from a merchant associate of the Nirvalen family in the neighboring port town. On her way home, she caught sight of something glimmering along the shore. Chlammy went over and picked up what turned out to be a shell about the size of her palm. She patted the sand off it and held it up to the sun—beads of light bounced off its surface in all colors of the rainbow.

Without really thinking about it, Chlammy held the seashell close to her heart and looked around. The Ten Covenants forbade any and all forms of theft. In other words, even something as seemingly insignificant as a pebble on the side of the road could be the object of theft should it have an owner. She kept the shell close and backed away slowly.

Nothing happened. The Covenants didn't intervene. That meant this shell didn't belong to anyone—at least, that's what it should've meant...

“This'd be mine if I were anyone else...”

Slaves had one additional requirement in order for them to *own* something.

Chlammy chuckled in self-pity, still clutching the shell when she left the shore.

—————

“—Master, I found a seashell.”

Chlammy bowed before an Elf woman with long, cream-colored hair—her

master, Fiel Nirvalen, surrounded by several ladies-in-waiting. Fiel looked at Chlammy with her usual sunny smile.

“How many times must I tell you? I don’t want to hear about every little piece of trash you pick uuup.”

Fiel eyed Chlammy as if she herself were trash, then departed the room with her legion of ladies-in-waiting close behind.

That was Chlammy’s signal to keep the shell for herself—that one additional requirement.

Such was the reality of being a slave in Elven Gard. Slaves didn’t have the right to own anything—in fact, they didn’t have rights at all. They were the property of the family who owned them, and everything they owned belonged to their masters. These terms were bound by their covenant, making them absolute.

There was one little difference between Chlammy and the other slaves, though.

Her master shot her a brief look as she left the room. Chlammy knew what the look meant:

—Why, what a pretty shell. Take good care of it.

Chlammy was no “ordinary” slave. She was, in fact, *friends* with Fiel Nirvalen, her master. Fiel considered herself best friends with a mere slave like Chlammy. This was particularly unusual, considering Chlammy’s lineage had served the Nirvalen family starting with her great-grandfather.

Typically, being called *best friend* by your master would probably make you hate them more.

...Unless Fiel was the master.

Fiel always found a way to help and support Chlammy when she was sad or struggling. Even if she had to be sneaky about it, Fiel was there to lend Chlammy a hand. And as heiress of the distinguished Nirvalen family, she worked as an acting member of Elven Gard’s Upper House now that her parents had kicked the bucket. She couldn’t be seen tending to a lowly servant’s needs. If an Elf of her stature was seen engaging in conversation with an Immanity—or

talking monkey, as they were called in Elven Gard—it would cause a scandal. That was why the most she could do for Chlammy was look sorry and help her in a roundabout way. Chlammy knew this, though. It was for the best.

Chlammy's family had been enslaved for several generations. Her relationship with Fiel was beyond anything she could ever hope for. She had an ally, a friend. And friendship is still friendship...even if it needs to be kept secret.



Later that night, Fiel visited Chlammy's room tucked away in a corner of the Nirvalen estate.

“Chlaaammyyy! ♥ I thought you might be feeling down about earlier, so your beloved Fi came to sleep with you—”

“Ah, w-wait, Fi, let me just—”

Chlammy quickly wiped her eyes and acted as if everything was all right. Fiel surveyed the sparse, bare-bones room. There were no decorations or items of note; just two sets of clothes: dirty slave garments and one presentable outfit for when Chlammy left the manor. The pile of hay on the floor was where Chlammy slept, though it looked more like a bird's nest than an actual bed. It didn't take Fiel long before she realized something was missing.

“—Why, where's the seashell from earlier?”

“...I-it's...in the trash...”

“They took it from you—*they* threw it away...didn't theyyy?”

Slaves couldn't lie to their masters, so Chlammy, shoulders trembling, had answered Fiel truthfully. Her visible anguish spoke volumes. Chlammy needed her master's permission to own anything. Fiel couldn't say yes to her wish because it would look like she was favoring a slave over her ladies-in-waiting, and then they would treat Chlammy even worse. So Fiel had specifically called the seashell a piece of trash.

The Elf clenched her jaw. If the master calls it trash, then the item doesn't belong to anyone—it becomes trash, and nothing more. Fiel knew her ladies-in-waiting had taken the seashell away because she'd designated it as trash. She

could picture it: They'd probably even smashed it before Chlammy's eyes, which were clearly bloodshot from crying. Her ladies-in-waiting refused to let Chlammy have anything, not even a single seashell—Chlammy's barren room practically screamed this at Fiel. She wasn't going to stand for it anymore.

"I will get rid of them alllll."

Fiel was still smiling, but her tone was much more sinister. She stood up, and Chlammy clung to her and shouted, "Wait—! Fi, you've got it all wrong!!"

"No, I know exactly what's happening heeere. Why, I'm the head of the Nirvalen household. There's no reason I should put up with my servants picking on my dearest frieeend."

Fiel wanted to ruin these ladies' lives—even if that meant *literally* ending them—but she was going to let them off with just losing their jobs.

They should be grateful, Fiel thought, half-serious.

"That'll only come back to bite you, Fi! I don't want that to happen to you!" Chlammy insisted. All of Fiel's ladies-in-waiting were from respectable families, albeit none as prestigious as the Nirvalens. Fiel wouldn't be able to fire them for merely pestering a slave without any blowback.

"Listen, Fi. I'm begging you... I'm fine being a slave as long as I have you by my side, but—"

Chlammy's eyes were filled with tears.

"—I don't want anything to happen to you, especially if I'm at fault—that would be the worst, so please—"

"Chlammy..."

"You don't have to worry about me—I'm used to it. In this country, Immanity are worth less than—"

Fiel wrapped Chlammy in a firm embrace, effectively silencing her. She smiled and petted her friend's hair to console her. But inside Fiel was a rage that was about to boil over like magma in a volcano on the brink of eruption. She stared off into the distance, still grinning, and a bleak thought surfaced in her mind:

—*This country is rotten to the core.*

The Elves belittled the other races while they sat undeservedly atop the thrones they were born into. The attendants who clung to the Nirvalens like pathetic parasites, too—they were just as rotten.

Chlammy had meant to say that as far as Elves were concerned, Immanity were worth less than dogs. That was certainly true in Elven Gard, at least.

Slaves? Oh, no, no.

To call them as such was an insult to slavery. In Elven Gard, slaves were more like cattle. Maybe even worse. A master could tell their slave to *rip out their own fingernails one by one*, and they'd have to do it. The Ten Covenants forbade doing harm unto others, except in this case. It made no sense, and yet, this madness was tolerated.

And we call ourselves a democracy, Fiel thought. *What a joke.*

The Upper and Lower Houses' elections were all a farce—putrid like a rotten corpse. Fiel knew this from the moment her father, a high-ranking member of the Upper House, passed away, and she inherited his position. It took three things to become a legislator in this country: heritage, money, and the right connections. That was it. The so-called *elected officials* were nothing more than rings decorating the decrepit fingers of the Senate—a group of representatives from houses of even higher prestige; a bunch of geezers who had aged into their positions.

And the Agent Plenipotentiary Advisory Council was even more influential than the Senate. The agent plenipotentiary, from Fiel's perspective, was a piece of work. He was regarded by the Elven public as the strongest of all agents plenipotentiary, and this popularity was what allowed him to push back against the Senate. His term, however, would be coming to an end in a little over three years. It wasn't hard to picture what the Senate and the legislative assembly would do once the Agent Plenipotentiary Advisory Council was no longer in the picture.

The country was a cesspit, rotten from the inside out. Fiel believed it needed to be destroyed. But if that wasn't in the cards—

"Chlammy." Fiel slowly let Chlammy out of her embrace. "I forfeit ownership of your rights."

“—Huh?”

That was all it took—Chlammy Zell was no longer a slave. She had been born into the shackles of slavery; it was the only life she knew. And just like that, it had ended.

“W-wait—”

Chlammy was now free, but the first thing she did was turn white as a sheet and burst into tears.

“Fi...are you throwing me away...?!”

There wasn't an inkling of joy in her expression. She looked sad, almost like she was in despair. Fiel knew why—Chlammy didn't know what it meant to be free. She didn't know where to go or what to do. Why would she? She had never been permitted to do anything of her own free will.

Who would ever wish this upon another living being? Fiel bit her lip—muffling her anger at her race—and with her usual sunny smile, she began to speak.

“Chlammy, I just want you to be happy, and for that—why, I'll do anythiiiing.” Fiel grabbed Chlammy's quivering hand. “So tell me... Now that there are no chains holding you back—what do you want to do with your freedom?”

Chlammy didn't seem to follow. Fiel closed her eyes and began a sort of confessional.

Hidden away deep within her heart were the two things she had resolved to accomplish.

“When I think of what my family did to yours... I know I don't deserve your friendship, no matter how much I want iiit... So please consider—”

“Fi...”

Fiel was going to ask Chlammy to consider taking her freedom, but Chlammy cut her off. “Don't say something like that... My answer would be the same even if I wasn't bound by this covenant.”

There was only one thing in the world important to Chlammy.

“I'm happy *as long as we're together*. But I need *you* to be happy, too. *You're*

the only thing that matters to me in this world.”

—————.....

“...Why, a-are you...being honest? Do you swear on it?”

“I swear—so please, make me your slave again.”

Fiel averted her eyes, which showed her hesitation. “But... Chlammy...”

“Those shackles you spoke of—that’s what binds us together! I’m just a slave... I may not own anything, but nobody—not even the Elves—can take those shackles away from me...!”

Chlammy’s faint voice cracked as tears spilled from her eyes.

“So please...I don’t care about a stupid seashell. If I were to lose my bond with you—I...”

...wouldn’t be able to go on.

Fiel knew what Chlammy was going to say, but she kept her gaze averted. She knew whose fault it was that Chlammy had become this way. Elves had enslaved Immanity since Chlammy’s great-grandfather’s generation. Fiel knew it would be disrespectful to even try and imagine how daunting a slave’s life was. Fiel wanted to know how Chlammy truly felt without the influence of her slave covenant, so she set her free from her shackles.

But was this truly how Chlammy felt?

Was she free to try and cling to that which had stolen her freedom in the first place?

Fiel continued to hide her tear-filled eyes. She’d wanted reassurance, but all she got instead was *doubt*. Everything felt so wrong, so aberrant. Fiel didn’t even know what was right anymore. But in spite of all that...

“I feel the same way, Chlammy—so please...”

Fiel defied the tears falling down her cheeks and announced the first of her two resolutions: Give Chlammy her freedom, but only should she want it—should it make her happy.

Fiel was willing to sacrifice her own happiness as long as she had Chlammy—

but if Chlammy didn't want that, either, then Fiel was left with her second resolution.

In order to bring Chlammy happiness, Fiel needed to attain her own happiness. But that wasn't possible here in Elven Gard. This country was rotten to the core; it ought to be destroyed. And if that wasn't possible—

“Chlammy—we're going to take over Elkia, the last surviving Immanity nation.”



Fiel went on to explain her plan.

She was currently an acting member of the Upper House, a position she would maintain only until the next election. Although Fiel's peers scorned her as incompetent, the Nirvalen name remained one of the most highly revered in all of Elven Gard. She was going to use her position and heritage to coerce the other Upper House members into allowing her to infiltrate Elkia and claim the Immanity race for the Elves.

Elkia was in the middle of a big shift in power. The crown was up for grabs after its last king recently passed away, and his dying wish was for the next ruler to be decided via a gambling tournament. This was the perfect chance for the Elves to set up a puppet ruler. Fiel would have her slave, Chlammy, infiltrate the tournament as an Elf spy and win.

The first question the other Upper House members would hit her with was—why? After all, neither the Immanity nor their small chunk of land were of any worth to the Elves. Nevertheless, Fiel had full confidence that her proposal would go through. She had the perfect reason:

Elkia was the key to beating the Eastern Union.

The Eastern Union had defeated Elven Gard four times in the past. They were a rising superpower and the only country the Elves couldn't figure out how to defeat. This was due to the nature of the Eastern Union's game—opponents must forget all memories of the game once it was over.

Having a puppet monarch controlling Elkia would give Elven Gard a way to

challenge the Eastern Union as the late king of Elkia had. But they wouldn't pit just any old Immanity against the Eastern Union—they would be using an Elf's Immanity slave.

That slave's rights belonged to Fiel, thus acting as a potential work-around for the memory loss that followed playing against the Eastern Union.

That being said, this was hardly a foolproof plan. Especially since it didn't include a strategy for *how* they would discover the contents of the Eastern Union's game—but this lack of coherency was *key*.

A plan that sounded nice but was full of oversights—exactly the kind an incompetent Elf like Fiel would think up.

That was precisely what the Elf legislation needed to believe for them to let her go through with the plan—they would pass it *in hopes* that it would miserably fail and thereby cause the Nirvalen family to lose its last semblance of prestige.

On the off chance that the plan succeeded, it would make the Upper House members who passed it look good before the Senate. Should it fail, well, it would be a good opportunity for them to get rid of the pesky Nirvalens once and for all. Either way, the Upper House only stood to gain something. They would never realize the true nature of this plan, though—

After Fiel established Chlammy as the puppet queen of Elkia, she had no intentions of going after the Eastern Union. No—Fiel was going to use Elkia against...

...Elven Gard.

This was why Fiel needed her peers to underestimate her, to think she was useless. Fiel knew she wanted to destroy this damned country from the core. It was the sole reason she'd pretended to be a useless ditz for fifty whole years: That was her *trump card*—



Fiel explained this plan to Chlammy in her room, which was undetectable even to the trained mage eye. Fiel had preemptively set up a sound blocking

spell, then a second spell to hide this spell, and a third to erase any traces of spirit responses. All her life, Fiel was ridiculed by those around her for bringing shame to the Nirvalen family. Little did they know, she was a hexcaster—one of the most capable mages of her generation.

“What do you think, Chlammy? 🎵 Why, what could possibly go wrooong? ♥”

“.....”

Chlammy looked at Fiel’s smile and gulped. She knew her smile was a mask that hid her devilish cunning.

“I won’t be able to stay in power past the next election. The other members want me out. So before thaaat happens, we need to take Elkia and steal all of Elven Gard’s land from under their noses little by liiittle. 🎵 We’ll fix a game against the Eastern Union under the guise of putting pressure on them, then I’ll have you declare warrrr against the Union, which would temporarily put us one step ahead of the fools in the Senate. Why, once we steal the land we need, we’ll cut Elven Gard off from all traaade...effectively preventing them from challenging us. 🎵”

—Fiel’s smile was as bright as the sun.

In other words, she would betray her race. Chlammy would certainly have an easier time in an Immanity nation. However...

“B-but what about you?! This will only make you miserable!”

Chlammy looked at her friend, who was trying to give up everything she owned to help her. Fiel responded with an even bigger grin.

“If you’re happy, I’m happy. You promised, righhht?”

“—What.....?”

Fiel had tricked Chlammy! Even when they were trying to work together, Fiel always had her wrapped around her finger.

“Not to worry. Why, pretending to be an Immanity will be a cinch for meee. We may have some trouble against the Werebeasts, buuut once we reclaim the rest of Immanity territory, I’ll be able to make my own little homestead. 🎵”

.....

“...Fi... Tell me... Why are you doing all this...for a slave...?”

“You don’t want me to do thiiis?”

“That’s not what I mean—! I just...don’t want you to lose everything for—”

Fiel cut her off with her usual grin. “Why, things would be far simpler if fame or fortune could buy your happiness.”

Chlammy hung her head low. She understood Fiel’s plan as well as why Fiel was beating around the bush about her trump card she’d had in the works for the past fifty years—the card she would use to destroy her own country. She was going to use it for Chlammy’s sake alone and lose everything in return.

“.....”

Chlammy knew she’d be lying if she said the proposal didn’t make her happy. The fact that Fiel was willing to go so far just for her own sake brought tears to her eyes.

But why? What about me makes her go this far—?

“Now, let’s exchange our slave covenant agaaain.”

Fiel interrupted Chlammy’s train of thought. The Immanity girl’s puffy eyes scrunched up in a smirk.

“You’ll have to reread the entire slavery code. That’s why you shouldn’t have broken the covenant in the first place——”

A formal slave covenant wasn’t something one could produce off the top of their head. A slapdash covenant would forbid a slave from eating, going to the bathroom, or sleeping without their master’s permission. It would make them too difficult to use. The opposite was true as well—too many permissions could create room for a slave to betray their master’s wishes.

There was an array of finer details that needed to be addressed when creating the ideal slave. These extensive intricacies were compiled into a massive tome which the master then had to read from before challenging and defeating their slave in a game by the Covenants. It was like anything else in Elven Gard: a ruthless system thought out to the very finest detail.

Fiel beamed. “Why, we don’t need a shitty contract. ♪”

“What...?”

Chlammy’s eyes widened as Fiel continued. “I, Fiel Nirvalen, challenge Chlammy Zell to a gaaame. Should I lose, I pledge to spend the rest of my life together with her, until death do us paaart. ♪”

“W-wait, Fi! That’s not slavery! It sounds more like m-m-marriage!!”

“Oh? Why, are they not essentially one and the same? You say potato, I say potaaaato.”

“That’s not how it works at all! They’re two very different things!!”

That’s not even a legitimate pledge. There’s nothing binding about it!

Chlammy tried to convince Fiel of as much, but she responded with the same smile.

“We want to be bound niiice and tight by a covenant no one can take from us. What difference does it make if we’re slave and master, friend and friend, or wife and wiiife? ♥”

“_____I think that makes a pretty big difference!!”

“Why, I don’t think that’s true at allll. Now, let’s get this covenant ready...”

A bond that no one could take from them—that was what she wanted to create with Chlammy. So Fiel Nirvalen was going to *bundle the two of them together*. She wiped the smile off her face and said with conviction:

“I’ll create a world where you can laugh and be happy, Chlammy. Just you wait.”

—*Am I really worth that much?*

Chlammy nodded even though the question still nagged at her.



All of this happened a mere month ago. Chlammy still couldn’t believe it was real.



—.....

.....

Chlammy had persevered through a series of relentless games, including existence Othello and the play for dominion to decide Elkia's next ruler. She had just returned to Elven Gard following the struggle between Elkia and the Eastern Union. It was her the first time back in her slave quarters in a long while. She grimaced as she played with a coin in her hand and stared at the ceiling. Looking at the coin shifting between her fingers, she remembered a certain man. He'd gazed into her eyes—and therefore Fiel's eyes as well—and made a declaration.

“.....‘Don't—underestimate humans like that,’ he said.....”

The words had shocked Chlammy to her core. This man who couldn't even use magic himself was addressing not just Chlammy, but all of Elfkind and every other race. He was telling the higher races, even the gods, that he was going to beat them all.

He doesn't expect me to buy that, does he? Any normal person with a lick of common sense knew it wasn't possible, particularly Chlammy, who had seen the immovable power of magic firsthand with Fiel. The Elves had to be all-powerful; why else would they have slaves spanning several generations? So of course Chlammy couldn't help but doubt the man. She even questioned whether another race was involved.

But now that she had his memories, Chlammy realized she should have questioned something else.

“I should've *questioned my sanity*. That man...him and his sister...they're out of their minds.”

Chlammy was speaking to herself aloud, unable to completely stifle her laughter.

Sora had shared his memories with Chlammy before they challenged the Eastern Union. He had so many memories; it was like a nightmare. She could feel his memories eating away at her own. And yet, there was one memory that shone bright enough to eclipse the nightmare. Chlammy laughed again, but this time, she wasn't grimacing. She had a brazen smile on her face as she clenched the coin she had been fiddling with.

—There's so much I need to do.

Fiel was off sharing every detail of the Eastern Union's game with the Senate's board of geezers.

But those details were false; they were based on memories Sora had altered using the Covenants.

Chlammy left her room to attend to matters while she still could.

"Where were you all this time, you pitiful slave?"

"Why are you still in your social outfit? Hurry up and get into your filthy rags, *slave*."

As always, Fiel's ladies-in-waiting met Chlammy with harassment. A few months ago, Chlammy would've tensed up if they even looked her way, but she wasn't the same Chlammy anymore. She had Sora's memories now—the man who'd outmaneuvered Fiel to the fullest extent. These Elves before her...they had this stupid look to their faces. It was almost cute. She could hardly believe she used to find these women scary.

"—Hey, what's that coin you've got there?"

One of the poor idiots saw that Chlammy was holding a golden coin.

Sora's memories contained a seemingly limitless number of ways to cheat and swindle others. Chlammy had access to them thanks to Fiel—not that she could explain this to the women. Chlammy pondered how best to answer them, and then she remembered:

—There's so much I need to do. I'll just have to start with what I can do on my own. Something befitting a slave—perhaps a little spring cleaning?

"My apologies. Master wanted me to hold these for her."

Chlammy stifled the smile trying to form on her face as she showed the women five coins. She was lying. There was no disputing that she was just holding them, though. If the ladies-in-waiting tried to take these away from her, it would mean they were taking them away from Fiel. The women flinched at Chlammy's retort, but the leader of their petty group broke the silence with a snicker.

“—Goodness, that woman continues to be a blight upon the Nirvalen name. Not only did she fail to take over the puny little Immanity kingdom, she’s also having her slave carry her money for her—who knows what goes on in that woman’s mind?”

“Nothing much, I daresay. All the nutrition she needed to grow a brain went to her chest.”

“Hee-hee, you’re probably right!”

The ladies-in-waiting chattered away, but Chlammy kept a straight face and poured oil on the fire.

“—I beg your pardon, but Master was able to utilize her defeat to discover the secret of the Eastern Union’s game. I believe that means she may have found a way for the Elves to take over the world’s third-strongest superpower... Correct?”

—This, of course, was also a lie. The report that Fiel was sharing with the Senate was based off false memories.

“We have Lord Wale to thank for that,” one lady-in-waiting retorted. “He’s the one who found a use for such an incompetent Elf.”

“She spoke out of line during a legislative meeting. It was quite deplorable,” another added.

—So that was how the public had received Fiel’s plan. It explained why these women were snickering and making fun of her behind her back. Chlammy just watched silently as they ridiculed Fiel, making note of every word.

That’s enough fuel for this fire, she thought with a grin.

“Don’t you imbeciles-in-waiting think it’s time *you* fell in line?”

_____.

Chlammy’s sudden change of attitude shocked the Elves.

“_____I beg your pardon?” one of them said.

“Cut the act... I know you heard me.” Chlammy snickered.

The Elf shook with rage and sneered. “Have you forgotten your place...? I say

you need a refresher course in proper manners—”

“My place? ...Ah yes, I *have* forgotten. So sorry. Maybe you ladies could remind me of my place when you’ve remembered yours?” Chlammy held her hand to her chin, doing her best to look deep in thought. “Now that her parents are gone, Master has *far* too many of you ladies waiting on her. And you’re a bunch of dimwits who’d be sent home to your lesser noble families—ah, excuse me—your *plebeian* families should you lose your present jobs...correct?”

The Elves were shocked at what they were hearing, but Chlammy didn’t stop there. “I wonder where you ladies would end up after being fired from the Nirvalen household—oh, I guess you wouldn’t be able to find work elsewhere.”

—The group froze. One of the ladies-in-waiting was about to yell at Chlammy, who cut her off:

“Ah! Now I remember! I’m a *slave*! A slave who needs to tell her master who is talking behind her back when she asks me! Silly me, I can’t believe I would ever forget such a thing!”

The ladies-in-waiting froze up again.

“But wait... What’s this? I seem to recall that every single one of you has insulted the master behind her back... My, how curious.”

Chlammy put on a twisted smile—the kind usually on Fiel’s face—and showed the women the gold coins in her hand once more.

“How about we make a little bet on who will get fired first—? Ah, my apologies. This isn’t *my* money. After all, I’m just a poor slave who’s merely been asked to hold on to it.”

The women exchanged panicked looks as Chlammy weaved her way past them. She could hear them making excuses for themselves behind her as she left.

“I got them, Fi. Hook, line, and sinker,” she whispered to herself as she strutted away, leaving the group of Elves in her dust.



—Later that night in the Nirvalen family living room:

The five ladies-in-waiting appeared before Fiel. They had an inkling as to why they'd been summoned. The group watched as Fiel examined them, then waited nervously for what she was going to say next.

But Fiel's next words caught them completely off guard.

"I'll be frank with you laadies. My slave tells me that one of you stole the money I had left with her."

—The ladies-in-waiting stiffened at the unexpected accusation. They had thought of excuses for talking behind their employer's back, but not for theft. Stealing was a one-shot way to get fired; they might never be able to find work again.

"M-my pardons! W-we're not quite sure what you mean, ma'am—!"

The first to respond to Fiel was the leader figure. The other four ladies behind her nodded their agreement, but things weren't looking good.

"Why, is that sooo? Very well, then... Please show me what you have in your pockets."

They followed Fiel's orders and began emptying out their apron pockets, but they each had something they weren't supposed to.

They all tensed up, one by one, the moment their fingers brushed against a coin.

Fiel, who was waiting for them to empty their pockets, turned to Chlammy.

"Slave? You *swear on your covenant* that the coins were stolen from youuu...?"

"Yes, Master... However, I'm afraid I cannot recall how or when it happened..."

The ladies-in-waiting looked at Chlammy, who was hanging her head apologetically, and began to panic—they tried their best to make sense of what was going on.

—Slaves were literally incapable of lying to their masters. Furthermore, the Ten Covenants prevented the women from stealing any money Fiel had left with Chlammy, her slave. The only logical explanation was that one of the

ladies-in-waiting had won the coins from Chlammy in a game, but that would mean they indirectly stole the money from Fiel Nirvalen. None of the women would ever do such a thing, lest they end up losing their jobs like Chlammy said they would. But the fact of the matter was that there were coins in each of their pockets. They all wracked their brains until Chlammy's words came to mind:

—Too many attendants...all of whom talk behind Fiel's back... Who will get fired first—?!

The ladies-in-waiting reached the same conclusion: One of them had taken the coins from Chlammy in a game so that they could keep their job.

A lone actor is trying to frame us all for something far worse than gossip to avoid getting fired. Not only that—whoever it is stole four of the five coins to do this...!!

The women exchanged suspicious looks as Chlammy, her head still down, laughed to herself.

—But of course this would happen. Of course all five women would blame one another.

(After all—there's no way they would know that I can lie to Fiel, and that those coins are mine, right?)

Chlammy was determined to prove that she could think of clever tricks on her own.

She had accessed some of Sora's more sadistic memories.

The Ten Covenants forbade theft of any kind, but they didn't say anything about *giving gifts*. You know, the kind of gift you give someone by dropping it in their pocket when you walk by them. What happens after they receive the gift? Well, you just have to wait and see.

Chlammy recalled one of Sora's memories where he'd tested this theory by putting his underwear in Stephanie Dola's pocket. She sneered as she remembered Steph's reaction.

Chlammy looked up at the women—it was about time for them to start playing the blame game.

“I’m innocent! Behold—my pockets are empty!”

First to speak was their leader—the one Chlammy didn’t give a coin to. How would the others react to this?

“Sh-she’s lying! *She’s* the one who stole the coins! She always talks about how Lady Fiel brought shame to the Nirvalen family!” shouted another lady-in-waiting.

Of course the rest of them thought their leader was the thief—then things got more interesting.

“Wha—?! You’re one to talk! I know you tell your little boyfriend, Lord Noel’s butler, everything that goes on in this house!”

Yes, yes, that’s it! Why, there’s more than enough blame to go around! Look at them go! It’s pandemonium! The sunniest of smiles appeared on Fiel’s face as the women continued bickering.

“I see what’s going on here. Why, it looks like everyone in the Nirvalens’ employ is utter gaaarbage. ♪”

Now Fiel had a legitimate reason to fire the lot of them. They’d stolen from their employer, and that would be on their records, too.

It doesn’t matter how much the other noble houses detest Fi. Who would even consider hiring someone with a reputation as a thief?

Chlammy had a slight grin. She met eyes with a smiling Fiel, who led the ladies-in-waiting to another room.

“I’ll listen to each of your excuses, one by ooone. ♪”

Chlammy watched Fiel leave with the women, and a phrase popped up in her mind. It was one she’d never heard before—meaning it was from Sora’s memories.

“All difficult things are made of simple things. Even the smallest ant hole can breach the largest dam.”

(I’m guessing this describes how all big incidents start with small things. That a stone wall can collapse because of an ant hole in the wrong place.)

But apparently, that wasn't how Sora interpreted it. Chlammy couldn't help but chuckle to herself when she recalled his own personal take.

“‘Everything’s simple. You can destroy an entire kingdom with a tiny hole.’ ... That’s so like Sora.”

And it was just like how Chlammy used four coins to bring down a group of Elves. She smiled as she twiddled the fifth coin in her fingers.



Chlammy sat in the Nirvalen manor's front garden, sipping a cup of tea at a wooden table. Those ladies-in-waiting had picked on her for her entire life. She watched as each of them, one by one, left the estate with a suitcase full of their belongings.

“...I guess this is...a sort of revenge,” Chlammy muttered, but strangely enough, she didn't feel anything deep down. She struggled to believe that Elves this pitiful once made her tremble with fear. This didn't feel like an accomplishment; it simply felt ridiculous. Chlammy got up to leave when she caught sight of the leader—or rather, ex-leader.

“_____”

Chlammy found herself grinning and realized that Sora's memories had tainted her mind. It didn't take long for the Elf woman to see her grin. Furious, she shouted at Chlammy.

“...Wh-why, you...! It was you, wasn't it—?”

Chlammy, meanwhile, calmly responded, “You're better off not knowing. Not only did you get fired from the Nirvalen estate—”

Her ear-to-ear grin looked like the grim reaper's scythe.

“—but heaven forbid word gets out that you were tricked by a worthless monkey. Am I right?”

—But if you're okay with the world knowing that, go for it. Tell all of Elven Gard that you were tricked by a worthless Immanity.

It was the first time Chlammy had ever seen an Elf turn pale with despair.

Aha—not too shabby.

From the Elves' high-and-mighty perspective, Immanity slaves were worth less than cattle. That was likely why this woman didn't regard Chlammy with anger or disgust—but shock and fear.

"Mm-hmm... I see the fun in this. I'm a little glad I got to witness your departure."

"Oh...oh..."

Chlammy looked at the dumbfounded attendant and remembered a certain phrase. She didn't want to steal Sora's words directly; she wanted to add her own twist to things, but—nah, never mind. She couldn't come up with anything better for this situation. She remembered what Sora told her that day. She wanted to try saying the phrase herself for once.

"—Don't underestimate humans like that, okay? ♪"

Chlammy wondered what her face looked like when she said this. She had no way of knowing, but whatever it was, it made the Elf woman cower in fear.

Now I'm satisfied.

"Fare thee well, Little Miss Worthless Ex-Lady-in-Waiting. I pray you find happiness...in the *hell* that awaits you."

The Elf scurried away as Chlammy waved good-bye with a smile on her face.

—Everything in this world is run by games, and those games are over before they even start.

Just like how the coin toss Sora used to bring the Eastern Union over to his side was already decided before he even tossed the coin. If that's the way this world works, then how about this? If games are over before they start, is there even a reason to participate in them? Just let the fools play a game among themselves, and watch them destroy one another. Sounds like a good idea, right?

"—I bet Sora would say something like, There's no beauty in a win by default. Sorry, Sora, but I'm going to use every card at my disposal until I get to your level, and—oof!"

“Chlaaaaammyyyyy! ♥”

Chlammy, who was trying to finish her monologue with grace, was interrupted by Fiel, who came flying out of nowhere and latched on to her. As in, she literally flew from the second floor using magic and landed on Chlammy, practically suffocating her with a hug.

“Hee-hee-hee, now it’s just youuu and me in this house big ol’ house. ♥”

____*Come again?*

“H-hold on, Fi, don’t tell me you fired *everyone* who works here and not just those five?!”

Chlammy had planned on a little spring cleaning for the manor, but Fiel had just cleaned summer, winter, and fall as well. Fiel stared at Chlammy in confusion.

“Why, I thought that’s what you wanted me to dooo? You made them doubt each other, so I took them in for questioning. They ratted out everyone, even those who weren’t related to thiiiis incident.”

Another phrase Chlammy didn’t recognize popped into her mind:

—The Prisoner’s Dilemma—

So that was why Fiel insisted on asking each of her ladies-in-waiting individually.

“If only they had stood up for one another, no one would have been fired. All you have to do is put them under a liiittle stress, and they all betray each other. ♪ Now they’ve all lost their jobs and brought shame to their familiiies. Why, they even told me juicy secrets about one another’s families. Heh-heh-heh. ♥”

Chlammy wasn’t surprised, though. She knew Fi was going to love this, but as always, she was one step ahead of her. Honestly, “love this” was an understatement—Fiel simply lived for this kind of carnage. Nothing surprising about that—but there was one problem.

“And with that, Chlammy, it’s just you. And. Me. ♪ Two little lovebirds with the nest allll to ourselves. ♥”

—*Maybe I’m the one being sent to hell...?*

Fiel had knocked Chlammy onto the grass and was slowly getting closer and closer, when—

“Fi, Fiiiii! C-calm down, will you?! There’s a chance someone might still be here, you know—!”

“Why, you may have a point there... Looks like we had better take this to the bedrooom. ♪”

“That’s not what I’m trying to—wait, where’d she gooooooooo?!”

Chlammy clutched her head as she called out for her friend, who must have teleported using magic. Then she had a thought:

—Sora was going to beat all the races, whether they be Elves or gods. Chlammy knew this by the look in his eyes. So she wondered: Was she herself even capable of pulling one over on Fiel—?

“Get ahold of yourself, Chlammy Zell!! What, are you going to just give up? She’s the perfect opponent!”

...Indeed she was. A little...over the top, for sure, but Fiel was, by all means, the perfect opponent...



Later on at the Nirvalen residence, a knock came to Fiel’s bedroom door in the middle of the night.

“Oh, Chlammy! What took you so looong? Why, I was about to get started without you!!”

Fiel seemed somewhat upset. Without asking what she was going to start, Chlammy began to speak.

“Um... Fiel... I don’t know how to break this to you, but since you fired all the attendants, I have to do all the chores around here... That includes laundering the pillow you’re holding.”

Chlammy sulked as she took the pillow away from Fiel, who responded, “Who cares about this houuuse? It’s not like we’ll be living here much longer anywaaay. Why, all you have to worry about is keeping this room clean. I can do

that with magic if need be.”

True, Sora planned on destroying Elven Gard from within. They wouldn’t be spending much time at the manor anymore once all was said and done; that was why Fiel needed to get rid of her attendants. If all went as planned—she and Chlammy would have to *leave this house* fairly soon. Nonetheless...

Chlammy eyed Fiel suspiciously. “...Mind letting me in on what you plan on doing for tomorrow’s breakfast?”

“Ah... Hee...hee-hee-heeeee. Why, I was just thinking about how much I’m looking forward to your home cooking. ♥”

Chlammy didn’t know if she should be relieved or concerned that even Fiel had oversights. Regardless, Chlammy heaved a sigh and entered the bedroom.

But then...

“Hmm, Chlammy... Those clothes really don’t suit the mood very welll...”

“The m-mood? What are you talking about...? Besides, I only own two sets of clothes—”

“Well, that won’t dooo. 🎵 After all, it’s our first night together all alone in this mansion. You should wear the appropriate attiiire.”

“Stop calling it our *first night*, will—?”

Spirits filled the air, cutting off Chlammy before she could finish her sentence. For a brief moment, Chlammy saw something shocking in the reflection of Fiel’s eyes.

“What are you—?!” she shouted as she tried to cover various parts of her body—she had been stripped of all her clothes—but Fiel beat her to it. The Elf looked at Chlammy with a big grin.

“Aaand, there we go!”

“Ugh... Magic is so cheap...”

Chlammy found herself wrapped in a silky negligee that was soft to the touch. Fiel smiled as her friend took a moment to admire the garment. The outfit was nothing more than an illusion Fiel had produced with her magic. The Chlammy

Fiel saw was still completely naked, and the spell would wear off when she went to sleep, but she wasn't going to tell Chlammy this.

“Oh, Chlammyyy! 🎵 Come on over heeere.”

She patted a spot on the bed next to her.

“—I have a bad feeling about this, but...fine.”

When the ladies-in-waiting used to live together with them, the only way they could sleep together was for Fiel to go to Chlammy's room. This was the first time they could sleep together in Fiel's bed—an *actual* bed.

—And boy, was it comfortable. Chlammy couldn't believe Fiel had forgone sleeping in a bed this luxurious just to join Chlammy on her bed made of hay. She was feeling kind of bad about it when Fiel spoke up.



“Chlammy... I want you to forgive me.”

“—Huh? For what?”

Chlammy was caught off guard by the remark, but Fiel went on to make her apology.

“Why, I’m sure you must have realized by now, but if all I really desired was to make you happy, we should have escaped Elven Gard together a long time ago and lived on the roooad.”

“.....”

—Chlammy had played with the idea before, but...

“But I was scared... After all, you’re an Immanity, which means...you will die long before...me. I was afraid that once I lost you, I wouldn’t be able to go on alone in the world... And since we’re different races, we can’t have children together, either...”

“—Sorry to interrupt you when you’re serious, but there is more than just race keeping us from—wait.”

Elves lived for over a thousand years. The most Fiel could do with her magic was extend Chlammy’s life span to just under two hundred.

So what would happen when she was gone? Fiel didn’t know—so she pretended never to realize this, but—

“Hey... Fi... Why do you do so much for me?”

Chlammy remembered that day. She remembered the doubt she had when Fiel told her about taking over Elkia. She liked Fiel, and she was obviously happy the feeling was mutual, but she didn’t know why Fiel was willing to go so far for an Immanity girl like herself.

“Why, you possess something that I as an Elf don’t... Can we just leave it at that for now?”

It was dark in the room, but there was a brightness to Fiel’s smile.

“—? What do you...?”

Chlammy didn’t quite follow, but Fiel kept the same smile on her face and

went on.

“I was so eager to create a place where you can be happy... But that was merely a means of escape for me. The truth is, I didn’t believe we’d be able to pull it off—this is just the way I am... So—”

“Don’t apologize for that, Fi...”

Chlammy stopped her from making her apology, which was beginning to sound more like a confessional.

“You had no reason to believe in me back then.”

“...Pardon?”

Chlammy chuckled uncomfortably and shared something she’d learned from Sora’s memories.

“Sora said during the tournament to determine the new monarch of Elkia that he was fine with letting me have the title.”

Fiel was surprised at the sudden turn the conversation had taken, but Chlammy continued with the same awkward smile on her face.

“Sounds crazy, right? But that guy really believes in his heart of hearts that ruling a country is a huge pain in the ass... And, get this, his reason for challenging me to a game in the first place:

“I don’t like the way you think.”

“.....”

“The plans I told him about were your plans, not mine.”

She recalled that day with a touch of self-loathing.

“He knew that the fate of an entire race couldn’t be left in the hands of a person with a slave mentality—someone like me, who believed Immanity couldn’t win against Elf. You know, Sora actually liked your plan. If I’d been the one to come up with it...then he would’ve let me win. At the end of the day, those two—they’re gamers, not politicians.”

That was why they needed Stephanie Dola to run Elkia for them. They knew that being good at games didn’t make them good leaders.

“But I’m—different now.”

Chlammy looked up at the ceiling. Her eyes weren’t empty like they once had been—like how Fiel knew them. They were full of *purpose*, gazing far off into the distance—they saw something.

“I promise I’ll rely on you more and stop shouldering everything on my own all because I don’t want to cause you trouble. So, Fi—there’s just one thing I want to ask you.”

I won’t run away anymore, no matter what—so please...

“Fi...could you help me?”

“Why, you don’t have to ask me twiiice. We’ll be together forever.”

—Fiel answered without hesitation.

Tears began to spontaneously erupt from Chlammy’s eyes.

“We are a team, you and I. We’ll do everything hand in haaand, step by step, shoulder to shoulder.”

—Something about that threw Chlammy off.

—*No*, Chlammy realized. *That’s been on my mind since the very beginning.*

“Hey...Fi... I, uh...really like you, y’know...?”

“Yuuup. ♥ I really like you, toooo!”

“R-right. That’s great to hear... But I just want to check: Are you and I—?”

“Hmm? Why, we’re partners. ♪”

“Yeah, about that. That’s better than slave and master, but by partners, you mean—”

Chlammy was thinking about the covenant that bound them together as slave and master, and how vague it was. What did Fiel actually mean by “partner”? How much of that covenant was genuine on her part? Fiel’s eyes were full of concern as she watched Chlammy ponder over this question.

“Chlammy... Does it bother you that...we’re different races?”

“N-no, not at all! You’ve always been the one person I can truly trust; that

hasn't chang—"

Fiel's expression brightened the moment she heard this. "Why, in that case, I suppose it really doesn't matter that we're both womeeen. ♥"

"Wait, what?! That's—so sudden! And an entirely different topic!"

"I love you, Chlammy... How do you feel about meee...?"

Chlammy noticed Fiel looked terribly uneasy asking the question, and took a moment to think about her answer. "Love" in Elven was a little different from "love" in the Immanity tongue. The former was a more general term used to describe affection between family and friends, for example. For humans, however, telling someone "I love you" meant something a little more...*serious*. But right now, Fiel and Chlammy were speaking in the Immanity tongue. And in that case, the meaning Fiel was referring to was—

"Is it that...you don't—love me?" Fiel asked on the verge of tears, voice quavering.

Chlammy answered her in a fluster, "Aaaah, all right! I love you! I love you! Now quit it with the sad puppy dog eyes!!"

As per usual, Fiel's expression changed instantaneously, as if she were swapping out a mask.

"Okaaay! ♥ The feeling is *mutual*, then. That means you won't have a problem with thiiis. ♪"

She reached out and put her hands on Chlammy's clothes, but Chlammy cried, "Don't try to take my clothes off! I'm n-not ready for that kind of stuff yet!"

"Yet. That sounds like a promise. Why, I suppose I'll just have to wait a little looonger. ♪"

—Fiel was back at it again, toying with Chlammy's emotions, only to back down at the drop of a hat. Chlammy sheepishly asked her a question.

"Hey... Fi... How much of that was a joke?"

"Hmm? I haven't said a single joke all niiight."

"—I'm, uh, g-going back to my room! I'm not ready for that kind of stuff yet!"

“Eh-heh-heh... Why, there’s nothing to worry about. I’m not going to *ravish* youuu. 🎵”

“So you’re saying you weren’t just actually trying to take my clothes off?!”

“...Why...I’m not sure about that myseeelf.” Fiel suddenly began mumbling, which caused Chlammy to tense up. “It’s not like I’m your parent... And I know it’s rather strange for an Elf like meee to get so attached to an Immanity like youuu...”

Fiel looked like she was still a teenager, but she had been alive for over half a century.

Even she herself didn’t know the answer to Chlammy’s question.

“I see something in you I don’t see in myself or other Elves. That’s the truth. But...I simply don’t know how to describe the feeeelings I have for you.”

Fiel looked down. This was the first time she’d ever been this open. She shared how she truly felt, despite her own bewilderment.

“I feel we are more than just *close friends*. But we aren’t family, and you definitely aren’t my slave.”

“.....Fi.....”

Fiel looked up at Chlammy.

“Sooo I was wondering whether *kissing you* would bother me at all. ♥”

“—Huh?!”

“And, why, the answer was no. So I supppoose that by ‘partners,’ we’re more like lovers, or perhaps married—”

“I-I-I’m going back to my room!”

“Huhhh? But, Chlammy, you were the one who asked to be my slaaave!”

“I-I-I know that! But this is different—!”

Chlammy lost her composure. Fiel looked up at her dejectedly and asked, “So... What do you meaaan? Chlammy...do you not like doing these kinds of things with meee?”

“_____I’ll answer that another day! And stop looking at me like that!”

Chlammy couldn’t resist Fiel’s big puppy dog eyes. She covered her face with a pillow and sank into thought.

She’s obviously messing with me, but it sounds like there’s a grain of truth in there as well. I can tell because we’ve been friends for so long.

—Why do I have so much faith in Fi, even though she’s another race? Why do I feel so comfortable around her?

Chlammy admitted to herself that she was always a step or two behind Fiel.

She wondered what Fiel meant to her. They certainly weren’t master and slave, and they obviously weren’t related. It was hard to imagine a friendship capable of forging a bond this strong, either. They trusted each other with their lives.

Chlammy tried rummaging through Sora’s memories: *Those two have a special relationship of their own, but it doesn’t really apply to us.*

...Maybe I should follow Fi’s lead. I wonder if I could kiss her—

“—Whoa?! N-no, being comfortable with kissing someone has nothing to do with friendship!!”

“Drats. You saw right through me... Why, Chlammy, you’ve gotten tougher...”

Fiel briefly clicked her tongue before assuming her usual grin.

“But it’s too late for you. 🎵 You won’t be able to get that question out of your heaaad!”

“Aaaaaah, I caaan’t heear youuu! Time for bed, time for bed, time for bedddd!”

Chlammy had to cut off this *Erof* before she crossed a line. She obeyed the logical part of her brain and forced herself to go to bed.



_____.....

After a short while, Chlammy finally managed to fall asleep. Fiel lay next to

her, gazing at her sleeping face. As much as she toyed with her friend, Fiel herself didn't know why she felt this way about her. Her Elf heritage—her common sense—told her there was no reason to get so attached to an Immanity. But she had another type of logic about her—one that Chlammy thought so highly of—and it resonated even more:

Who gives a shit why I care about this girl so much? I'd do anything for her.

As she considered this, she also pictured those two siblings—Sora and Shiro.

"I thought Chlammy would understand my feelings *now that she has Mr. Sora's memories*...but perhaps my expectations were too sky hiiiigh."

Evidently, not even Sora had an answer to Fiel's feelings. She was still curious, but knowing what Chlammy thought now wouldn't make a difference. Fiel was going to continue following her gut, moving forward hand in hand with Chlammy. That was it—except...

"...The Ten Covenants prevent you from violating another person's rights—I suppose the same goes for when that person is asleep..."

An idea popped up in the back of Fiel's mind. What if she could kiss Chlammy while she was asleep? That is, what if the Covenants didn't prevent her from doing so? Would that mean Chlammy accepted her feelings—would that answer her questions?

.....

"Erm...mmm! I'd better nottt. 🎵"

She wanted their first kiss to be a shared experience. Then Fiel giggled as she decided—

"Why, if we can beat Mr. Sora and his sister to the title of the One True God, Chlammy's life span and race won't matter anymoore."

—she was going to help Sora with his plan.

However, she and Chlammy would be the ones to defeat Tet. A slight grin appeared on her face. Sora—no, both he and his sister—were only interested in playing games. And not against just anyone. They wanted to play against a strong opponent; someone stronger than them. They were gamers to the core

—and mere children.

Fiel knew that Chlammy had likely picked up on a certain important detail from Sora's memories. Although he fully intended on fighting together with Fiel and Chlammy, there was one reason why he didn't bind them by the Covenants.

"You want a rematch—don't youuu, Mr. Sora? ...Why, consider this challenge accepted. 🎵 We'll beat you and your sister, juuust the way you want us to...♥"

Fiel had a sinister smile on her face as she closed her eyes and fell asleep. She and Chlammy weren't going to take their loss lying down.

HIGH CARD ALL RAISE (PART 1)

Legend has it that the two strongest beings met in the heavens, seeking to end the contradiction that was their dual existences. Their battle took place on what was once the world's highest mountain—Múspellskjálfr. The mountain is now long gone, no longer lingering on the horizon. And yet, the fearsome battle that occurred atop its peak is still talked about to this very day.

The mightiest of the Old Dei—Artosh, god of war.

The strongest Dragonia—Hartileif the Final.

It was a time before the world as we know it existed. High above the summit overlooking the world below was the site of a heavenly duel from the distant past—

“Answer me this—what is strength?” the god of war, Artosh, asked atop the summit of Múspellskjálfr.

—He was the manifestation of war. The embodiment of slaughter, the ultimate cycle of souls struggling between life and death in battle. He was the zenith. Incomparably strong.

“’Tis something thou shalt never know,” Hartileif the Final answered solemnly.

—The Dragonia Ruler's massive wingspan engulfed the skies. This was Hartileif, the oldest of all Dragonias, born from the mortal remains of a god. This unparalleled being who stood high atop Múspellskjálfr was indestructible in both soul and body. He knew no injury; even the gods heeded his words—he, too, was the zenith.

A god and a dragon. The two strongest beings. Their battle began with a series of questions and answers.

“—Why is that?” the god of war asked.

“Because thou art the strongest,” came the Dragonia Ruler’s immediate reply.

“—Then what does it mean to be the strongest?”

“I cannot answer, for I, too, am considered the strongest of all beings.”

“—Dost thou believe the strongest being cannot know what it means to be the strongest?”

“Indeed. ’Tis something only the weak can comprehend.”

“—Then you and I shall not prove who is the strongest.”

“That would be impossible. In the same way one cannot know the unknown. As a filled glass can hold no more wine, endless victory naturally leads to questions left unanswered. ’Tis but an endless cycle.”

Silence fell—some would call it brief, others eternal. The two ultimate beings faced each other until time seemed to lose all meaning—

“—Then we can indeed prove it!” the god of war shouted in rage. His voice shook the heavens, but the Dragonia Ruler held the earth together and replied:

“O *powerless one*. Only he who challenges the strongest can prove that he is the strongest. The day thou knowest defeat shall be the day thou understand what it means to be the mightiest being.”

The god of war shook his head. The Dragonia Ruler’s answer appeared to disappoint him. “—Thou claimest one must know defeat to know strength?”

“Verily. One cannot know true strength without experiencing true weakness. The same way one cannot know light without darkness.”

Artosh glared at the Dragonia and spoke quietly.

“—Then, almighty Dragonia.” He gripped his glittering spear and asked:

“—If I challenge thee and lose, shall I finally know what true strength is?”

“No. For thou cannot possibly lose to me.”

The god of war seemed to despair.

“Poor god of war. All those hopes and prayers offered to thee, and yet, this is why thy strength is so utterly empty. Thou dost not challenge me; thou merely

seek the knowledge of the strongest being, but thou shalt never truly comprehend—yet I do not lament for thee.”

Hartileif understood that the spear clenched in Artosh’s hand—so hot it burned time itself—could melt his indestructible scales, flesh, and bone. And yet, Hartileif the Final spoke warmly as he faced impending death.

“I knew this day would arrive. Thou already defeated me so many years ago. Thus, I knew what I would say to thee on this day: Thou shalt know defeat because thou art the strongest. And when that time comes, thou shalt know what it means to be strong or weak.”

He suppressed the joy he felt from having finally reached this moment and hoped the god of war felt the same way.

Artosh struggled to conceal his anger, his hatred. “Nonsense,” he spat, his voice tinged with envy. “My victory is eternal. I shall remain on top till the end of time.”

“Indeed. This is precisely why thou shalt eventually know defeat,” Hartileif said, then made an empty addendum: “I wish thee the best of luck.”

He slowly spread his gargantuan wings. From the mountain’s summit, they seemed to cover every speck of land.

“I see this discussion was meaningless, dragon. You will soon forfeit your title of mightiest being.”

“’Twas a fruitful discussion, god of war. You shall soon learn what it means to possess that title.”

—These were the final words spoken before there was only one strongest being left standing. Their contradicting existences collided; they blotted out the heavens and scarred the earth with a blue death.

That lofty peak Múspellskjálf was turned into the deepest of craters, which eventually became an ocean. This transformation is living proof of the legendary clash between zeniths, and the remaining raw energy continues to permeate the sea. The area today is a channel the land dwellers dubbed Thrymgap.

This cataclysmic event—what can only be described as a true legend—occurred one hundred and fifty thousand years ago.

.....

Era: 𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂 < 𐄂𐄂 𐄂𐄂 Year: 𐄂-𐄂 𐄂𐄂 𐄂𐄂 Day: 𐄂𐄂𐄂

I killed many Elves, Phantasmas, and Fairies today. I quite enjoyed myself. I think it was a good day.

—The Great War.

The gods vied for the throne of the One True God, pitting their creations against one another in an eternal battle. It was a never-ending cycle of hatred and slaughter among all races. The reddened sky was clogged with ash, the earth stained blue from dead spirits. The struggle that nearly brought the planet to its knees spread death everywhere; no land was without bloodshed, no sky without incessant cries of agony. The world was filled with despair, anguish, and loathing beyond even the greatest poet’s description. To call this era of bloodshed hellish was an insult to the word itself.

There were those, though, who were happy here. They liked the way the world was, and couldn’t imagine a better world even if they tried. Their delight was palpable. Indeed, one particular race enjoyed this war to its fullest extent.

“Can you believe this?! Sarakil stole my rarity level three kill!”

“Well, ‘stealing’ isn’t a nice way of putting it... How about, ‘I got ’em first’? Ha-ha-ha. 🎵”

“Hey, hey, hey, apparently those filthy moles built the strongest ship in the world! Who wants to go exterminate them and their ship with me? 🎵”

A race that needs no introduction—the Flügel.

—These angels were in paradise, their own personal Elysium. Each one a sweet young girl with a smile on her face and an unquenchable thirst for blood. Their city was situated on the back of Avant Heim, a colossal Phantasma that drifted through the sky. It was an idyllic time. There was lush greenery, flower petals floating on the wind, and the tweeting of birds as beautiful angels flitted gracefully through the air. The Flügel spent their days singing songs of exultation.

—My, my, my, heh-heh-heh! 🎵 *Giggle, giggle, let's kill them all!* ♥

They lived life to the fullest in this brutal world, enjoying every ounce of the bloodshed around them. Who would have thought there was a group of beings having so much fun as the world spiraled toward its own destruction? Never mind that this particular race played a large role in turning the world into the hell it was. Just like any other day, the Flügel emulated love and peace and sisterhood as they exchanged disturbing banter.

...Absurd, isn't it? Those who dwelled on the earth's surface hung their heads in despair, cursing their decaying world as well as themselves for their own inadequacy, not knowing whether they would live to see tomorrow—but in the skies above, the angels were rejoicing. Such a stark contrast can only be described as absurd, right?

That's just how the world works, though. If one person is happy, then somebody else is equally unhappy. That's basically the nature of happiness—and yet! It was the Flügel who brought this world to the deepest pits of hell—nay, to a place even deeper! How unfair is it that they get to monopolize all the world's happiness?! It's exactly how capitalism works in our— Er, well... You know...

Let me start over—that's just how this world *works*.

Flügel are the personification of absurdity. Hatred and loathing and murder was the flawed trajectory from which the world could not escape; it was why the Great War refused to end. The Flügel—and the ether from which their creator was made—were no different. In truth, there was nothing actually absurd about them. These women are the consequence of all living creatures' desire to fight each other. The Flügel were born to spread war and embody death.

In other words: "You reap what you sow."

It doesn't make this world any easier to accept. The Flügel themselves *could not care less* about all of this.

Their nightmarish paradise in the sky echoed with one woman's cheerfully dopey shout:

“Nyaaah!! Hey, everyboody! The girls and I are back! We’ve made our triumphant return!!”

The Flügel paused their brutal conversations and turned their heads to see the sky warping—a byproduct of Flügel shifting. The resulting high-pitched sound signaled their sisters had returned from the earth below victorious.

“Oh! Sister Azril, welcome hooome. ♥”

Another Flügel greeted the arrival with a smile, and many more shifting sounds followed. About one hundred more Flügel appeared, all covered in blood. The youngest of them, also known as the Irregular Number, was among them.

“Jibril! Welcome back!”

“Hey, hey! How many of the Elves do you think you offed this time?!”

The Irregular Number—Jibril—had remarkably long, prismatic hair and amber-colored eyes with cross-shaped pupils. Of all the blood-drenched Flügel who had returned from battle, she had the most commanding presence.

“I did not count how many rarity level two kills I claimed. I merely slaughtered everything in sight—including a Phantasma. ♥”

She licked the blood off her cheek and gave a smile that even a god would die for.

The crowd of Flügel cheered when they heard of Jibril’s quarry. They wanted to know everything—how many lives their sisters took, what kind of hellscape they produced on the surface below. The sisters got closer, excited to hear all the bloody details, but Azril hushed them. “Nyaaah! Hold it, everyone! We’ll tell you what happened later, after we tell Lord Artosh!”

The crowd reluctantly opened up a path, and the rest of the Flügel who had returned from battle followed Azril, the First Number, through.

“You sure are popular, Jibril.”

The Flügel next to Jibril sounded pleased. She was missing one of her eyes and wings, and her halo was broken to the point where it was barely visible. Her name was Rafil.

Long ago, the Flügel had once managed to defeat an Old Deus in battle. The battle took place before Jibril had been created, so she had only heard rumors about what happened. Rafil had led their army and succeeded in piercing the Old Deus and destroying its ether. The injuries she sustained were so severe that not even Artosh could heal them.

“No, I’m nothing compared to you, Elder Rafil...”

—Jibril had a deep respect for Rafil, who still fought on the front lines despite her injuries. Rafil responded with an awkward chuckle and ruffled her youngest sister’s hair. “You don’t have to be so humble. You’ve done some incredible work. Be proud of what you accomplished and stand before our creator.”

“Nya-ha?! Raf! Since when did you get so close to Jibs?!” Azril scurried over and shooed Rafil away from Jibril. “No one’s allowed to pet my little Jibs but me! Stay back!”

Azril latched on to Jibril and hissed at Rafil like a cat.

“*Elder* Azril, please stop touching me without my permission. It’s getting quite annoying. ♥”

“Nyaaaah! Why, though?! Do you like Raf better than your big sister?!”

Jibril was smiling, but she stared at Azril like she was a piece of garbage. Azril slowly backed away after yelping in despair. Rafil smiled, slightly frustrated, and intervened.

“Y’know, Jibril, there’s no reason for you to be so nasty to Azril. Keep in mind that she’s our leader.”

“Forgive me, my elder, but I fail to see how anyone could possibly respect this *thing*.”

Rafil looked at Azril, who was on the floor, crying. “She didn’t used to be like that... Ah well.”

She heaved a sigh, and then the still blood-covered group proudly made their way to their creator—to announce their triumphant return.



—Their creator was in the throne room.

The playful atmosphere from earlier was no more. This went for both the Flügel who had just returned from battle and their sisters who had flocked to listen to their tidings. Every single one of the angelic beings got down on one knee and lowered their heads.

The object of their worship was relaxing upon the throne. He was a boulder of a man, the strongest being in the world, the god of war, and the creator of the Flügel—the Old Deus Artosh. He gazed down at his winged pretties with his golden eyes, and his proud voice filled the air.

“—Ye have done well, my Wings.”

He stroked his rugged beard, the color of black steel, and continued mildly:

“—First Number, Fourth Number, Irregular Number, do tell me your accomplishments.”

At his command, Azril was the first to give her report.

“I shall start by sharing the results of the battle—the enemy has been destroyed; our forces saw twelve casualties.”

They had engaged the Elves in combat—specifically, a rite the Elves were testing out. This rite—the brainchild of one pesky Elf, Nina Clive—could control magical life-forms for military purposes. Should it function properly, it would potentially allow the Elves to hijack Phantasmas, Gigants, and eventually even Flügel.

Jibril was up next. She couldn't hide the smirk on her face as she spoke.

“We showed those forest mutts how preposterous an idea it was to try and control us Flügel. Sometimes the pitiful dogs need a little reminder of which of us belongs on a leash. ♥”

The contents of Jibril's report explained the smug look she had. The hundred Flügel troops under Azril, Jibril, and Rafil's command had been unaffected by the Elven rite, and with smiling faces, they annihilated every Elf they saw: those who had compiled the rite along with the facilities they were using. Before returning to Avant Heim, the Flügel forces also annihilated the Fairies they

assumed were assisting the Elves.

Rafil added something worth mentioning. “The Fairies, as you know, are located in a spatial phase boundary known as Spratul. As such, their villages are rather difficult to locate... We currently know the location of two such hidden villages. Also...” Rafil shot Jibril a glance. “...we engaged in combat with the Phantasma Cloud Vortex, which had been affected by an incomplete version of the new Elven rite.”

The Flügel who had just returned from battle all looked at Jibril.

“A thirty-woman squad led by Jibril attacked the Phantasma—and destroyed it.”

The rest of the Flügel in attendance were astonished upon hearing this. The Phantasma known as Cloud Vortex was a sentient fog—a literal natural disaster, a cataclysm capable of independent thought. Little was known about the creature other than that it was nearly impossible to defeat. Jibril continued as if this was nothing.

“It was as simple as destroying the core those brainless Elves were kind enough to *point out for us*. ♥”

Azril and Rafil were quite formal with their reports, but Jibril was different. She was smiley and more expressive. Mind you, this was in front of their creator. She didn’t even try to hide her smug joy.

The incomplete Elven rite had caused the Phantasma to go on a rampage. Jibril had deduced that the target of the failed rite was whatever the rite used to control the Phantasma—its core. And her deduction was correct; hence her satisfied grin. Going against a Phantasma usually ended with casualties climbing up into the triple digits—

“Enemy casualties came to... Well, does it even matter? 🎵 We eliminated every life-form we could detect. ♥”

—Rafil followed with a general summary:

“Twelve of our number were injured, but none sustained mortal wounds. Their injuries are being treated as we speak.”

The Flügel had defeated a massive Elf army, a dangerous spell, and even an unexpected Phantasma. They annihilated their enemies, and all without any losses of their own. It was a victory in its fullest form.

Azril continued proudly:

“We were only able to achieve our initial prediction of zero fatalities despite the Phantasma’s unanticipated appearance thanks to Jibs—Jibril—and her quick thinking on the battlefield, Lord Artosh.”

She felt a smile tug at her lips as she listed her youngest sister’s achievements—specifically, defeating the Phantasma. She’d almost used Jibril’s nickname in front of their creator, but managed to catch herself before she did.

“Hmm—”

Artosh seemed impressed. He looked at the wounds covering Jibril’s beautiful, blood-soaked body; they certainly weren’t minor.

He then gave a deep nod of approval and said, “Well done, Jibril.”

“Your words are wasted on me, Lord.”

“Such feats cannot be achieved solely with the power I bestowed upon thee. ’Tis proof of how thou hast polished thy soul on the battlefield. Thy growth pleases me.”

Artosh’s jovial response caused a stir among the Flügel in attendance. They eyed Jibril enviously.

“—I am feeling generous today.” Artosh was grinning, something he didn’t do often. “I shall give thee a reward. Ask for whatever thou desire.”

“You have my gratitude, Lord—I shall take you up on the offer. ♥”

Jibril bowed her head as she spoke and then lowered into a brief curtsy before standing up straight.

As soon as she did, the air around her began to warp. A vast number of spirits surged around Avant Heim, causing him to rumble with surprise.

And then—

A section of the city atop the Phantasma’s back was obliterated. The throne

room was now a whirlwind of dust and light produced by the sudden, devastating Heavenly Smite.

Jibril, the one who had launched the Heavenly Smite, had shrunk down to the size of a small child—but her body quivered in pleasure.

“Ooooh! ♥ That did nothing against you! Ah-haaa! Ah, I’ll have to devise an even better attack to show you the next time we meet!!”

Azril mentally revised her battle report as she clutched at her head.

—*Jibril just doubled...tripled our casualties.*

The Heavenly Smite Jibril used on Artosh left barely a scratch on him, but it did create a massive shock wave.

“Raf... Could you bring the girls who were injured from the attack just now to the Chamber of Restoration...?”

“Understood.”

Rafil moved quickly—she seemed used to this kind of situation—and teleported away with several injured angels in tow.

—There was nothing to be surprised about. This certainly wasn’t the first time such an incident had occurred.

To be honest, *everyone in the room saw it coming* as soon as they heard of Jibril’s achievements on the battlefield and learned that she was going to see Artosh. Right before entering the throne room, they had readied their evasive and defensive magic. The majority of Flügel in attendance had shifted away the second they sensed Jibril preparing her Heavenly Smite. Thus, most of the injuries were on the light side. However—

“Jiiiiiiiibs. ♥ Got a second? Mind telling me **why you thought it’d be a good idea to add more casualties?!’**”

The child version of Jibril cocked her head to one side in confusion.

“But Lord Artosh said he’d grant me a wish. You know I only wish to try to move him from his throne. Surely even you, regardless of your low IQ, saw this coming—?”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to do that?! It makes me look like a dummy for singing your praises!”

“Oh, no need to be so humble, Azril. It doesn’t make you *look* like a dummy—you already *are* one. 🎵”

“—Good.”

Their creator uttered a single word, which reminded Azril that she was still in his presence. She immediately sank back down onto one knee.

“A fine attempt. But thou still hast much to learn. I look forward to thy next attempt, Irregular Number.”

“Ah-haaa! ♥ Your words are wasted on me. 🎵”

—If that was all their creator had to say, then there was nothing further for Azril to add. She began wearily giving orders to the Flügel who were still present.

“...Bring everyone who has their hands free to come help repair the throne room. Let’s make it look better than it did before.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

—This was, well, more or less an average day for the Flügel during the Great War. The floating city of Avant Heim was like no place else on this desperate, war-ravaged planet.

...As absurd as it may sound, it was, in a sense, a peaceful time...



“Jibs... You’ve really gone and done it now—”

As soon as they left the throne room, Azril tried to scold Jibril in her child form —

“What?”

“Nyaaaaah! Jibs gets eighty percent cuter when she’s all teeny tiny—wait, no! I’m actually really mad this time!!”

—but ended up yelling at her and rubbing her face against her cheeks. Azril

may have looked angry, but that didn't keep her from nuzzling against Jibril, who grumbled, "Is that so...? In that case, could you act more like it? Highly unpleasant as this is, I haven't the energy left to break free or teleport."

"I know that! That's why I need to take advantage of this opportunity! I get to be mad *and* enjoy your cuteness—it's two birds with one stone!"

Jibril couldn't do anything to free herself, so she sighed and simply acquiesced. Azril continued to interrogate Jibril as her cheek rubbing intensified.

"What were you even thinking?! Why do you insist on Heavenly Smiting Lord Artosh?!"

Azril wondered how many times she'd asked Jibril this same question.

—This was par for the course. It's why everyone picked up on what was going to happen ahead of time and took the necessary precautions. It was just a part of being a Flügel at that point, like a family tradition. In the same way Artosh always enabled Jibril's behavior with a smile, Azril always questioned why Jibril would do such a thing.

"Hmm, how should I put this...? Ah yes, let me think about it—"

And, as always, Jibril took a moment to think about her answer without any clue as to what she did wrong.

"I know my attacks won't hurt him, but seeing them have so little an effect only makes me want to at least budge him off his throne all that much more—ah, Azril! Here's an idea should you like to be useful for once! How about you *and the rest of the girls* all fire off your own Heavenly Smites, or maybe—? ♪"

"No maybes! How am I supposed to react when I hear you talk about harming our creator with a smile on your face?!"

"I think your usual dopey-looking expression should work just fine. ♪ What do you think?"

Jibril's comment was a dagger to her elder's heart. Azril fell to her knees; her eyes had glossed over. "Ugh, feels like my heart's gonna give out. What are you going to do if Lord Artosh gets mad and attacks you back?"

Jibril would probably—no, definitely—get reduced to ash, if anything remained at all. Jibril herself knew this as well—but, still in her child form, she looked at Azril with the same baffled expression she always had when she spoke with her.

“Hmm? Personally, I believe that challenging Lord Artosh is precisely what he wants me to do.”

“Whaaat—? What do you mean by that?”

“Um, I mean exactly what I said... It’s rather self-explanatory, don’t you think?”

“When I look at Lord Artosh, I feel as if he wants me to try and kill him... Perhaps your eyesight is too poor to see this, though.”

_____.

“Jibs... You’re special. That’s why you get away with stuff like that—”

Azril slowly got to her feet.

“—but as leader of the Flügel, I can’t let this pass.”

—Not only did Jibril try to kill their creator, she asserted that he actually *wanted* to be killed. Azril couldn’t tolerate such talk if Jibril really meant it, no matter how special she was. Azril looked down at Jibril emotionlessly, but Jibril replied:

“What are you going to do—*purge* me?”

—She had a thin, provocative grin on her face as she looked back up at Azril.

“.....”

“I know you could destroy me if you really wanted to. Especially now that I’m in this form.”

She gazed down at her arms, which she could barely move after using up so much of her power, and laughed at herself. If that was the trust their creator put in Azril, then so be it—

“It’s your right to do with me what you will. However—”

She met Azril’s eyes. The elder Flügel wasn’t nearly as bloodthirsty as Jibril

herself.

“—just promise you won’t get mad at me when I fight back. 🎵”

—*Bring it on.* She was raring to go.

Jibril was the youngest of the Flügel, created when Artosh was in his prime. But she wasn’t nearly as strong as the First Number, Azril.

Azril was leader of the Flügel, so it was only natural that she’d be the strongest. Jibril, on the other hand, didn’t even have enough energy left to shift. Despite this—no, it was actually precisely why—she was champing at the bit. To borrow her elder’s words—

I need to take advantage of this opportunity—to fight against the world’s strongest Flügel!

—They squared off for a moment.

The Flügel onlookers slowly backed away when they noticed the immense tension emanating from the two of them. Things seemed ready to snap at any moment...

“—Awww, Jibs, you’re always so serious! If Lord Artosh is okay with it, then I’m okay with it! That’s what makes you so—darn—cuuute! ♥”

Azril instantly relaxed and went back to rubbing her cheek against Jibril’s.

After all, whatever Jibril thought—rather, the fact that she was capable of such thoughts—was only because their creator had bestowed upon her the right to do so. It meant she possessed a divine will beyond Azril’s own comprehension. Meanwhile, still glued to Azril, Jibril replied:

“...Then if you’ll allow me to be frank. That’s what makes you so—incredibly—booring, nya-ha.” Indeed, Jibril sounded devastatingly bored.

“Ah!! Are you copying the way I speak?! I knew you loved your big sister, nya-ha!!”

“Right... So you ignore the boring part and go straight for the nya... I swear on Lord Artosh that I will never say it again.”

Azril ignored Jibril’s grumbling and proceeded to cheek-on-cheek her to her

heart's content.

“...I think that's enough for one day, Azril.”

“Gnyaaa?!”

Rafil pried Azril off Jibril, sending the elder Flügel slamming into a wall, and picked up the younger Flügel.

“Jibril, it's all well and good to exercise your free will, but at least consider the consequences first. I'm taking you to the Chamber of Restoration.”

Rafil scolded her like she would an actual child before walking away with Jibril in her arms. This was met with two similarly childlike responses.

“E-Elder Rafil! You needn't worry about me! Another five years in that chamber and I might die from boredom!”



“Nyaaah! Raf kidnapped my child! Somebody stop herrr!”

The smaller Flügel child flailed her limbs (wings included) in Rafil’s arms. The bigger Flügel child peeled herself out of the broken wall and dragged herself across the floor in tears. Rafil eyed the two of them wearily.

“—Then I’ll leave you with Azril. But bear in mind that you’ll be spending the next fifty years automatically regenerating in her care—”

“Five years without Azril, you say? Count me in! ♥” Jibril reversed course before Rafil could finish her sentence.

“Noooo! Don’t take away my Jibs! Five years?! A world without Jibs is hell on earth!”

Which was ironic coming from the one responsible for the current, literal hell on earth.

Rafil looked at the two and thought:*Ahh, so peaceful...*

Azril watched as Rafil and Jibril shifted elsewhere. Despite scolding Jibril earlier, Azril couldn’t help but admit that she didn’t actually believe Jibril was pleasing Artosh.

By no means did Azril believe what Jibril said was right. Lashing out at their creator was preposterous, *even beyond her own comprehension*. That being said, Azril rarely saw Artosh smile like he did with Jibril—he’d had that same smile on his face when he vanquished Hartileif the Final. So Azril excused Jibril’s behavior. Jibril was fine the way she was. In fact—

“That’s what makes her sooo darn cute!! I can’t take it anymore—I’m going after her!”

The loud thumping of a temporal shift followed, alerting the nearby Flügel to rush toward her.

“S-Sister Azril?!”

“What are you doing?!”

“What’s it look like?! If I fire off a Heavenly Smite of my own, I can spend the next five years together with Jibril, ah-ha, nya-ha! Chamber of Restoration, here

I come—my own personal El Dorado!”

The Flügel looked at their leader and thought:

—*Is she legitimately dumb?*

In the next moment, a beam of light pierced the crimson skies of Avant Heim.

They then reached the same conclusion:

—*That’s a yes...*

Eva: 𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂 𐄂 𐄂𐄂 𐄂 Year: 𐄂- 𐄂 𐄂 𐄂 Day: 𐄂𐄂 𐄂

I’m so glad to finally leave the Chamber of Restoration after five long years. I heard Azril fired her own Heavenly Smite and ended up in the Chamber as well. Apparently, she was under the impression that she would be able to stay in the same room as me... My poor elder really is such a dunce. The rooms in the Chamber of Restoration are all private, and since she is so much stronger than me, her recovery will take much longer. Every time I heard her wailing coming from her room, I was reminded of how stupid she is.



The earth was stricken with hellfire and death, spiraling through space toward its demise. A single shadow floated leisurely in midair and said to herself:

“Such lovely weather today. ♥”

Jibril cheerfully took in the sky above, which was obscured by a thick red mist. In each of her hands, she had—well...it was kind of difficult make out *what* exactly, but they appeared to be four heads.

—One hour earlier...

“Hey, didja hear about the deviant Phantasma going around calling itself a Devil?”

“Deviant...? For the fifth time, it’s variant... Say it with me, ‘var-i-ant.’ Okay?”

“Whatevrrrr! Apparently the little deviant made something called the Four Guardians.”

“If this so-called Devil made them...they’re probably just higher-level Demonias, I’d imagine.”

“Mm-hmm. 🎵 And get this—they’re going around claiming they’re stronger than the Flügel—”

The moment Jibril caught wind of this, she teleported to the “Devil’s” territory.

This brings us back to the four heads—they used to belong to the aforementioned “Four Guardians.”

“Well, that was a letdown. *Stronger than the Flügel*... What an absolute load of hot air...”

Jibril realized she should have known better. She heaved a dramatic sigh.

“They were just stronger types of Demonias. But even the strongest insect is still an insect. I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up.”

...Should we feel sorry for the Four Guardians that got hunted down and slaughtered within the span of an hour? Or was it their fault for not watching their mouths, with their “*stronger than the Flügel*” business? At the end of the day, they were still the Four Guardians—a rare Demonias kill—so Jibril decided to bring them back with her despite her disappointment.

“That was my first battle in five years, so I was in tip-top shape... I was hoping it’d be a bit more of a challenge,” Jibril said with a pout.

She had teleported to the Devil’s territory and destroyed everything she saw. It just so happened that the so-called Four Guardians were caught in the destruction as well. It certainly didn’t feel like a battle. She barely batted an eye. With a few waves of her hand, the entire territory was cleaned out. Hardly a fight; at best, it was—

“...A nice *warm-up*, I suppose. I want my battles to be a bit more thrilling—ah! Whoops!”

She accidentally clenched her fist and almost crushed one of the heads (mind you, these used to belong to the strongest Demonias) so she switched them all over to one hand.

“Phew, that was close! 🎵 Ahem, right. Battles are supposed to be—!!”

After rearranging the four craniums, Jibril continued talking herself.

“They need to be *all-out brawls*! I want each and every blow to force me and my opponent to wrestle with the reins of death! There’s no fun in one-sided domination... It’s like pouring water on an ant-hill and watching them drown... Although that sounds like it’d be pretty fun, too! Geh-heh-heh. ♥”

Jibril had never actually done that to ants before. So she figured, why not try?

It brought to mind a famous Flügel idiom:

“There’s no time like the past.”

In other words: If you feel like killing someone, hurry up and go cut off their head!

Jibril immediately sprang into action. She started descending in order to locate an ant’s nest.

“—What’s this?”

She could see something far off in the distance. A massive white being was flying at a high speed just under the clouds. It was—

“A Dragonia—hmm. But I’ve never seen a white one before... It must be my lucky day. 🎵”

—Jibril licked her lips. Her eyes glinted dangerously.

As far as she knew, the only Dragonias left after Artosh had vanquished Hartileif the Final was Aranleif the Ultimate and his Followers. However, Aranleif and all of his Followers were the color of nighttime, and Hartileif had no Followers of his own. That meant the white dragon ahead of her either had no Ruler, or perhaps—

“A Follower of Reginleif the Enlightened?! Now that’s the kind of head I want to take home! ♥”

Jibril sped up; she wanted that Dragonia’s head for herself. Four Guardians, who? They were *just a nice warm-up for her*! She tossed aside their dangling heads, and they plummeted toward the ground.

—A Flügel had never gone up against a Dragonia alone and won.

This also piqued her interest; *wouldn’t it be fun to be the first?!* Jibril didn’t

hesitate and flew straight toward the gargantuan Dragonia. Legend had it that no Dragonia had ever taken Hartileif's spot ever since his demise at the hands of Artosh. Jibril couldn't help but wonder why Artosh always looked so bored even though he had destroyed the strongest Dragonia ever to live. The thought soon left her mind when she realized—

“...I'll know for myself when I defeat one. As they say, a kill is worth a thousand thoughts. ♥”

She rattled off another Flügel idiom and sped up even further.

But this Dragonia was fast. *Really* fast. He was getting farther and farther away from her. She flew as quickly as she could, but the distance between them didn't close one bit. Then it dawned on her: There was no way a being of such mountainous scale was physically flying through the air. This wasn't flight, but rather *the surrounding space leaving the dragon behind as it moved*. The dragon itself was a fixed coordinate that defied the mechanics of space-time.

—Speed wasn't the issue there. It didn't matter if Jibril moved at the speed of light; she wouldn't ever catch up to the Dragonia.

What was she to do? She thought for a moment before a smile appeared on her face.

“Oh, silly me. I just need to *give him a friendly greeting*. ♥”

—With a wave of her arm, she sent the Dragonia her *friendly hello*. The space around the Dragonia distorted until neither sound nor light could keep up. The nearby mountains were reduced to rubble from a deafening roar that shook heaven and earth alike.

This was Jibril's way of saying hello.

“—Pardon me for bothering you during your flight. My name is Jibril.”

She lowered herself toward the scorching crater where a mountain range once dotted the landscape. In the middle of the crater was the dragon, looking up at her.

—*Remarkable*, she thought.

The draconic being was virtually unscathed, which was to be expected, given

his magnificently indestructible body. The light from the embers around him reflected off his pure white scales, as perfectly stainless as a glistening glacier in the northern seas. Most stunning of all was his sagely gaze, as if he wasn't looking in the same timeline—as if he was gazing upon an unknown something far in the distance. This was certainly none other than a Dragonia, the most perfect living thing in this world.

There was a dignity to the creature that was strikingly godly, more so than any of the Old Dei (with the exception of Artosh). The white dragon looked at Jibril and began to speak.

“FOOLISH, FRAIL-FEATHER, FOLLOWER OF THE EMPTY GOD, I’LL FORGIVE THEE BUT ONCE. —*BEGONE.*”

Jibril couldn't understand what he was saying, but upon hearing his draconic utterance, she and the world around her—everything in the Dragonia's line of sight—were blasted into pieces and blown away.

—The Dragonian tongue was inherently magic, each word a command to the laws of nature. Should they say “death,” everything within the vicinity was reduced to corpses. Should they say “shatter,” everything was smashed to smithereens. This was the planet's primal tongue, vestiges of the same energy used to create the world.

There were a variety of different names for the Dragonian tongue, such as the universal language or the language of creation, but no being other than the Dragonias themselves understood its essence.

“_____Cough.....hack.....wheeze.....”

Jibril knew that to fight against such mighty power, she would need to hit this Dragonia with something *even mightier*. She'd collected nearby spirits along with others from her spirit corridor to defend herself from the devastating attack.

“—Well...that was much stronger than I expected... What...happened?”

With the same endearing grin plastered on her visage, she cocked her head in genuine bewilderment.

—A single word was all it took to wound a lethal weapon (read: a Flügel) from head to toe. Something was off, though. After being hit with such a

powerful attack, this Flügel was laughing. The Dragonia stared at her warily and then asked:

“—Art thou alone, frail-feather, follower of the Empty God?”

He spoke to Jibril in her native tongue. Unfortunately, he phrased his question poorly—or perhaps he phrased it this way on purpose—and simultaneously pushed two of her buttons.

“...You dare call Lord Artosh an ‘empty god’ AND you belittle my wings...? I must say, you’re quite the brazen lizard. 🎵”

The blood-drenched angel was even more murderous now. The dragon’s attitude shifted; he was no longer hostile or confused, but instead...*curious*.

“Surely you do not seek to challenge me on your lonesome. What is thy bidding, frail-feather?”

——Something within Jibril audibly snapped.

“Surely, I do seek as much. I shall be straightforward with you.” She bowed and offered a smile twisted in rage. *“I want to throw you off your sky-high horse so that you sink to the surface below... More specifically, I wish to rip your head from your shoulders. 🎵 It’s not every day you encounter a talking, flying lizard. ♥”*

——Jibril was fairly peeved—quite livid—flat-out furious, even. Her body quivered as she attempted to keep herself from lashing out at the dragon. She was making herself quiver so that she could regain the energy she’d lost defending herself from the dragon’s one-word attack. She needed all the energy she could muster to kill him in one blow.

Jibril wasn’t thinking about the consequences.

The white dragon, with his massive wings that spanned the reddened heavens, watched the angel in silence. He gazed upon her small wings as if he were an archaeologist who had just discovered a rare fossil. A few moments passed before he seemed to realize something. He then spoke.

“How fascinating. To think I might see the day when a troubled set of feathers would appear before me. O, the wonders never cease during a life eternal.”

He sounded impressed. This time, it was Jibril's turn to be confused.

"Troubled...? There's not much troubling me, other than the fact that I can't understand this filthy lizard's Flügel."

The dragon's all-seeing eyes showed what appeared to be joy—and then the air began to vibrate.

"I see the Empty God has finally begun questioning the significance of slaying Hartileif."

It took Jibril a few moments to realize that the billowing vibrations were her opponent's laughter. She started laughing as well, and with a dark grin, she finally realized: This dragon was unspeakably powerful. She flinched ever so slightly, then asked herself a question: *Does it always take me this long to recharge my energy?* 🎵

—I'm going to kill him right now.

Jibril rushed to squeeze as much spirits as she could out of the atmosphere.

"I'll ask thee, feathers. Dost thou believe thou canst defeat me?"

—Can you defeat a dragon who can destroy the world with a single sentence? the white dragon who dominated the skies asked the angel. Jibril tilted her head back toward the heavens, and with an even more twisted grin than before, she replied:

"It seems unlikely that I'll be able to communicate with a lizard such as yourself. That question is ridiculous, past the point of absurdity. But, since you went out of your way to ask, I'll go out of my way to answer—*of course I do.*"

All the while, Jibril withstood the hurricane-force gales generated by the dragon's wings.

"However...," she continued, "I'm not particularly interested in whether I can."

—She didn't care about the outcome of their match. She only cared about one thing.

"I've been presented with a chance to destroy a powerful opponent; I have no choice but to accept the challenge. ♥"

—That’s what war is. The kind of war she craved: one that whittled away at her very soul.

—The dragon understood her clear-cut answer.

—But Jibril didn’t understand the dragon.

Something about his behavior was off. He was *contradicting* himself. His wingspan nearly blocked out the heavens; it seemed as if it could block out the entire planet. This was part of the dragon’s overwhelming presence, and yet, his presence was at odds with his kind demeanor.

“I shall help thee seek the answers to questions thou dost not realize thou hast.”

“Are all lizards this spiritual? I have no desire to listen to your preaching, so —”

With a sinister grin, she answered the dragon’s request.

“—let us do battle. Let us kill and be killed. Let’s vanquish each other. ♥”

Her words were laced with insanity, ecstasy, and rage.

With every fiber of her being, Jibril summoned her greatest Heavenly Smite—

“SHATTER.”

—but before she could unleash her attack, her foe uttered his second draconic word. That was all—a flap of the wings and a draconic mumble.

“_____Huh?”

—Almost reflexively, Jibril used her Heavenly Smite, but not to attack the dragon. She used it in an attempt to cancel out the word he had just finished speaking, the phrase that leveled the area around them.

“Our meeting was not fortuitous. We have misjudged each other.”

She couldn’t stop the destruction. Her consciousness began to fade, and all she could hear was the dragon’s voice.

“Try again some other day, feather. Once we come to understand each other, challenge me as often as thou like. Do not fail me now.”

He left her with a friendly warning. Jibril was absorbed into a vortex of destruction at the cellular level. Barely able to maintain her form, the last thing she remembered seeing was the dragon flying away.

Jibril...a Flügel...a god-killing weapon...was powerless to stop something far more powerful than herself. She lost consciousness.



Eva: 𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂 Year: 𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂 Day: 𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂

I was quite upset after I lost to that Dragonia. I spent another seven boring years in the Chamber of Restoration, but at least it gave me that much time away from Azril. That part was rather nice.

—————

Seven years passed before Jibril emerged from the Chamber. She had been unconscious for more than half the time she spent there. The first thing that left her mouth the moment she emerged was:

“Hmm, I wonder why I lost... Quite peculiar, really. ♥”

As she speculated to herself, Azril caught sight of her from far away and audibly gasped.

“—Jibs, you can’t be serious!! I’m gonna bop you on the head! Why did you think you could beat a Dragonia?!”

“Oh, Azril. You’re still alive after seven years? What a shame.”

“Jibs... You’re gonna make your big sister up and cry!”

Azril was already sprawled out on the ground and crying when a second angel brushed her aside.

“Jibril... I’d also like an explanation.”

—It was Rafil. “Brush aside” wasn’t entirely accurate; rather, she demi-shifted on top of Azril, who squawked in pain. Rafil ignored her and questioned Jibril with a puzzled look on her face.

“What were you thinking...going up against a Dragonia? Maybe we trusted you too much—I may have to reevaluate your position.”

Rafil was much more dignified than the self-proclaimed elder sister kicking and screaming beneath her. But Jibril didn't have any idea why they were reprimanding her.

“Well, I knew it wouldn't be easy—”

Jibril had fought Dragonias on multiple occasions, but only ever with a group of fellow Flügel. They had defeated more than just a few—Jibril should have been fully aware of the difficulty involved.

Dwarves claimed that a single scale of a Dragonia was more formidable than one thousand warriors. Its flesh and bones were so tough that it normally required fifty to one hundred Flügel to put up a fight. There wasn't a substance on the planet harder than its hide, and thus, even its remains lasted for an eternity. The Dragonias were indeed strong, possibly even rivaling a lesser Old Deus.

Jibril didn't believe for an instant that she could easily defeat such a creature. She would've been satisfied if her strongest Heavenly Smite managed to peel off a scale or two.

She knew this, and yet, something bothered her.

“Fifty to a hundred Flügel can eke out a victory, but I could barely do anything alone... Hmm?”

She was powerless against the dragon, and the nature of her defeat wasn't that simple. Not only did she fail to land a single strike on him, she wasn't even sure if he had actually attacked her. The tiniest of birds are at least capable of holding their own against a falcon. Jibril didn't care that this encounter almost cost her life.

She tilted her head in thought and muttered, “I'm not satisfied with how it went.” Rafil sighed.

“I might as well destroy that Dragonia! What do you think, Azril?”

Still flailing beneath Rafil's feet, Azril shouted, “I think you're insane! You almost died, ya know?!”

“If you say *no*, Azril, then that means the right answer must be *yes*. I'm

heading out to search for the dragon. Thank you. Elder Rafil, I'll be right—"

"Jibril."

Rafil stopped her from teleporting away.

"...Answer me seriously. It was a coincidence that we even managed to save you."

Rafil fixed Jibril with a piercing glare.

"You just spent *seven years* in the Chamber of Restoration. You should be thankful you have a stalker. Had Azril not been following you, it would've been too late to save you... I should add that our Flügel leader planted herself in front of the Chamber for all seven years, crying nonstop. It was really annoying, honestly."

"Nyaaah! You don't have to tell her that! You're making me sound like an overprotective idiot of a sister!"

"Azril, you're not right in the head. What are you if you're not an overprotective idiot of a sister?" Rafil retorted. She was basically asking Jibril to be thankful to the angel freaking out beneath her feet. Jibril clearly felt that was unreasonable, but Rafil continued.

"I'm going to ask you one more time: *What were you thinking challenging a Dragonia to a battle?*"

Jibril knew that her much-respected elder might look down on her depending on how she answered. And yet...she still genuinely had no idea what she was being criticized for.

"My apologies, Elder Rafil, but please allow me to ask you a different question."

Therefore, Jibril was going to respond with a question of her own:

"What makes you believe I can't defeat a Dragonia by myself?"

Azril (who was still under Rafil's feet) was the one to answer her. "That's just the way the world works! Do you need someone to knock some sense into you after all this time?!"

Rafil gave a small nod to Azril's statement. "Even a single scale of the weakest Dragonia harbors at least the maximum amount of spirits a Flügel is capable of using. That means just two of a Dragonia's scales are as powerful as your average Heavenly Smite, Jibril. Multiply that by the tens of millions of scales on a Dragonia hide... You'd need to be infinitely stronger to even hope to penetrate their defenses. I know you know this."

Jibril did know this, and yet, she'd challenged the dragon fully aware of this fact. So why?

"That's not possible."

—She answered without hesitation.

Azril and Rafil were shocked to see Jibril reject their notion of common sense. Jibril continued her explanation as if it were something obvious.

"If what you say is true, then we would need a lot more than fifty Flügel to penetrate a Dragonia's scales. Even if we managed to do so as a group, there's another layer of tough flesh and bones underneath that scaly hide. If Flügel aren't strong enough to penetrate all of that, then I'd like one of you to explain how we have been able to defeat Dragonias in the past."

"...Hmm."

"Nyah...nyaaah... I, uh..."

Azril couldn't admit she didn't know the answer to that question. Flügel can penetrate a Dragonia's defenses with enough numbers, but that was the extent of their knowledge of the race. This is because when a Dragonia dies, its body disappears in a fiery blaze. Nobody knew anything about how their scales or defensive magic worked. All that the Flügel did know was that they could overpower the dragons as a group.

However—Jibril had a theory based on that lack of knowledge.

"If Flügel can defeat Dragonias with numbers, then I should have been able to do at least *some* damage against a Dragonia on my own. But, as you already know, that was not the case. So I'm trying to figure out what happened—"

—She wasn't happy that she had to explain something so painfully obvious. It

confused her—why couldn't they understand where she was coming from?

“There must be some kind of condition that's met when we attack as a group. A way to defy the Dragonian tongue. There has to be, or else it makes no sense why I have been able to defeat other Dragonias in the past, but I could do literally nothing against this one alone. Is that any easier for you to understand?”

—Azril and Rafil were silent for a moment. The latter broke this silence with a chuckle and a sigh.

“Fine, sounds logical to me. If that's how you feel, youngest sister, then you're free to do whatever you please.”

“Thank you, Elder Rafil.”

She curtsied to her respected elder, the one who understood her logic.

“Hey! Raf! Whaddaya think you're doing?! You trying to get Jibs killed?!”

“—Oh, sorry, Azril. I forgot you were still here.”

“Why do you guys all treat me like this?!”

Rafil finally got off Azril, who leaped right to her feet.

“Attention all Flügel! This is an order! Capture Jibs!”

Azril knew that Jibril was going to head straight for the Dragonia and challenge him to another match. She did not know, however, if she would make it out alive this time. There was no way she would let her go through with it—!

“Sorry, Jibril!”

“She is our boss, after all.”

A legion of Flügel appeared out of nowhere to capture Jibril, but she met them with a smile.

“I'll tell you ladies where the heads of the Demonica Four Guardians are if you restrain Azril for me. ♥”

—The Flügel all turned on their heels in unison.

“Sorry, Sister Azril!”

“Sorry, boss! Brace yourself!”

All at once, the horde of angels set themselves upon Azril.

“Nyaaaaah! What’re you guys doing?! I’m your leader! Why are you treating me like this?!”

No one was sure if they should answer that question. Even Rafil looked away when she heard it. Everyone was silent—except for one smiling angel.

“If you must know, I could spend the entire night listing the reasons, but if I had to pick a single one—”

Jibril said plainly what everyone else wanted to but could not.

“—perhaps your lack of *charisma*. ♥”

—The news hit Azril like a ton of bricks.

With that, Jibril disappeared, leaving a shell-shocked Azril in her wake. Azril broke free from her fellow angels’ restraints and squatted down into a thinking position.

“Do I...lack...charisma...?”

—There are times when silence speaks louder than words. And this...was one of those times.



Artosh was seated on his throne. The large doors to the throne room—a place Flügel normally entered by shifting—were kicked open. Azril came stomping toward her creator in a fit of tears.

“Waaah! Lord Artosh! Everyone keeps saying things like I have no charisma, and that I’m a stupid idiot!!”

Artosh set his eyes upon his feathered followers’ leader, who was bawling on the floor before him. The almighty god, the strongest of the gods, her creator, shared with her his divine words:

“—Why doth the truth upset thee so?”

Right, then. I’d better just take my own life. ♥

Azril was so shocked by the words that—with an empty smile—she readied a Heavenly Smite to use on herself—

“I apologize for the fuss, Lord. Please forgive my intrusion.”

—when Rafil appeared out of nowhere and slammed her through the wall of the throne room. Once their two-woman routine was over, Artosh solemnly asked Rafil:

“—Fourth Number. Has *it* broken?”

“Your consideration will no doubt please her immensely. She is merely unaware of how bothersome the Irregular Number finds her.”

Artosh scoffed. With a look of satisfaction about her, Rafil turned to leave the chamber—but then a thought crossed her mind.

“...Lord, if you would permit me to question your most profound intentions.”



Artosh's dignified gaze silently urged her to continue. Rafil responded by getting on one knee and asking:

“—Why do you call Azril, first of our number, an ‘it’?”

Artosh didn't move a single muscle. His stonelike countenance—full of boundless wisdom and acumen—showed a hint of fatigue. The creator, with his indomitable will, capable of changing the fate of the world with his utterances, answered her.

“I have no particular reason. Nyah.”

.....

—*I see.*

“How sublimely profound, Lord. You never cease to amaze me.”

Rafil was shaking after receiving a revelation of biblical proportions from her creator. She bowed and made her way out of the throne room to find Azril still causing a ruckus.



(Lord Artosh—a god among gods, king among kings, the strongest and most supreme being.)

His divine will was all-encompassing, omnipotent. He knew all. So it was only natural for him to understand all forms of jest.

It explained his choice of words.

“Ugggh, I hate everyone... I'll show you allll...” Azril grumbled.

—He'd meant that Azril's entire existence was a joke.

Rafil looked down at Azril weeping on the ground like a child. Without much thought, she kicked the angel aside and glared at “it.”

“...Quit it with those crocodile tears already and get up.”

“They're not *all* crocodile tears! You're so mean, Raf! I can't stand youuu!!”

Azril was sprawled out on the ground with large tears pouring out of her eyes like a spoiled brat.

“...Raf... Do you think Jibs hates me?”

Rafil let out a big sigh. Was Azril seriously asking her this question? *You're so awkward*, she thought before replying:

“The way I see it, Azril, is that as the First Number, you're almost too perfect... You need to try being a little more flexible. At least, that's likely one of Lord Artosh's wishes.”

A part of Rafil also felt for Azril.

“Jibril will never be able to tell that you like her with that act you're putting on.”

“..... But...this is all I know...”

—Azril, the first of the Flügel, was responsible for watching over and commanding the Flügel born after her. She was a tool for bringing her creator victory in battle, the cause for great destruction throughout the world. Even when faced with certain death, she would lead as many Flügel as required into war with a smile if it needed to be done to actualize her creator's will.

But then there was Artosh's special creation: the Irregular Number.

For reasons unknown to Rafil, Azril had changed ever since that day Jibril was created. Only Artosh knew what he wanted from Azril and Jibril, but it was evident that Azril had particularly exceptional feelings for Jibril. She was a special unit; they couldn't afford to lose her.

Rafil wondered if those feelings had developed into this strange obsession Azril had with Jibril. This obsession contradicted Azril's original purpose; it was likely the reason she struggled to communicate how she felt about the Irregular Number.

With a smile, Rafil offered Azril her hand, which she used to slowly prop herself up. Rafil looked at Azril and muttered:

“Jibril would freak out if she knew her dumb oldest sister was the reason I lost my wings.”

A lack of charisma, she'd said... Indeed, anyone who didn't know how Azril *used to be* might think that about her.

—It was maintained that Rafil had been the one to puncture an Old Deus's ether in a past god-killing battle. This wasn't the entire truth, though.

What really happened was Azril used Rafil as a shield, then as a weapon to penetrate the ether. She never showed any signs of remorse after the fact, either. She'd merely smiled and, what's worse—

Rafil grinned uncomfortably as she remembered what Azril had said to her.

"... 'Raf, you've been super helpful. Now it's time for you to die' ...right?"

Charisma? Who needs that when you're the strongest Flügel in existence, who will do anything to win? Azril used to strike fear into the hearts of all—including Rafil—but...

"Nyah, nyaaah...uh, I've apologized like a hundred times. Wouldja forgive me already...?"

—Azril was hanging her head down low in dejection.

This was the Flügel who had never apologized, not once, over thousands of years. And now—she'd been this way ever since Jibril appeared on the scene. It was quite fun to tease her. The best part was—Azril thought she hadn't changed a bit. Isn't that rich?

Rafil knew that Jibril was different from the rest, but perhaps every Flügel was constantly changing—

"—Ah....."

"Nyah...wh-what, are you looking to pick on me some more?!"

Rafil snickered as Azril backed away from her in fear. Then something seemed to vaguely click into place within Rafil's mind:

In Artosh's eyes, everything—including the concept of war and even the world itself...

...was nothing more than a joke.

—Jibril was quite powerful.

The same went for all the Flügel. They were incredibly powerful, some of the most powerful beings in all of existence. But—they were by no means the *most*

powerful. That title remained their creator's. It was a universal and absolute truth, regardless of how strong Jibril ever became. The same way that white Dragonia considered her weak—it was all relative.

“Hmm... I may have just come up with an interesting theory.”

The theory was the answer to a question Rafil held for hundreds of years. Her almighty creator, Artosh, was the vanquisher of gods. A supreme being capable of manipulating the world itself. Rafil was hit with a fleeting thought.

Why did he make her or Jibril or Azril—or any of the Flügel?

(I know it's shameful to question my creator's divine intentions, but—)

Rafil felt that attempting to understand Artosh's godly will was a form of worship in its own regard. She was by no means trying to judge him.

(—maybe he was just...bored?)

Her creator was the god of war, the strongest of the gods. He had the world in the palm of his hand—so then what? What happens next? His sole desires were ceaseless calamity and never-ending war. So he planted seeds of chaos throughout the world.

That was likely why he made the Flügel. In which case...

Rafil had a different thought at the same time. If her theory—that everything was a joke to Artosh—was correct, then perhaps he had higher expectations for Jibril and the rest of the Flügel. So then why did he let Jibril challenge a Dragonia despite her being the weaker opponent? What part of his divine will allowed her to think that way?

—The strong look down on the weak?

Rafil didn't know what her almighty creator sought in doing this, but—

“Azril, you really are hopeless.”

“Nyah?! Where'd that come from all of the sudden?! Uggghhh! I'm done!”

Azril, with her hands covering her face to hide her tears, shifted elsewhere in space. Rafil couldn't help but laugh to herself.

We're just jokes—and if that pleases our Lord, then it is an honor. But in that

case, I think I've figured out why our Lord saves his smiles for Jibril.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't jealous... But this is what Lord Artosh desires. It's Jibril's special privilege."

She knew Jibril would fulfill their creator's wishes. In other words—

"...Defeating a Dragonia on her own...would redefine common sense."

What would that mean? What did their creator, the strongest being in the universe, desire?

HIGH CARD ALL RAISE (PART 2)

Legend has it that the two strongest beings met on this very land seeking to end the contradiction that was their dual existences.

—The channel known as Thrymgap was once the spot where the world’s loftiest peak, Múspellskjálf, stood—where the Old Deus Artosh, god of war, vanquished the Dragonia Hartileif the Final. Dusk had fallen. High above the summit overlooking the world below was the site of this heavenly duel from the distant past, said to have turned the sky red and the earth a deathly blue.

Even to this day, that same sky trembles with incessant thunder over the channel. Within the channel’s endlessly boiling depths lay a lone dragon, quietly biding his time. His white scales shone brilliantly amidst the twilight as he looked up at the heavens, remaining perfectly still. The dragon’s eyes, filled with profound knowledge, caught sight of something up ahead. The bloodred sky showed a single glimmer of light flying toward him like a comet.

It was an angel.

Above the being’s head was a geometric halo, on her back were wings of light—she was a Flügel. The beautiful young girl had long hair that glimmered in all colors of the rainbow and amber eyes that gleamed with volition. She was a single feather, created by the almighty god of war to do his bidding. The dragon called out to the angel; she was carrying some sort of enormous steel mass.

“—*Well met, Little Feather.*”



Jibril was quivering before the white dragon. Though she was used to his grand physique, she was also captivated by it. Her heart started beating faster. She could barely contain her excitement; her blood was boiling. The yet-unnamed Dragonia teased her.

“Thou art a woman of fine taste, albeit somewhat peculiar. Art thou here for thy sixth defeat, or—?”

Jibril cut him off there, and with a grin on her face—

“—You need not worry, dragon. This will be the last time we meet.”

—she readied the mass of steel into a fighting stance. With her halo now spinning, she prepared herself for an all-out battle. Her opponent, the dragon, squinted his azure eyes and spread his expansive wings so they almost covered the sky. He asked her:

“Little Feather, dost thou know who fought at this very location a long time ago?”

“Of course I do—why do you ask?”

Jibril spoke without the slightest hint of enthusiasm.

A battle between the Flügel creator and the most powerful Dragonia took place over one hundred thousand years ago at this very spot. She’d never given this legend much consideration.

—Jibril laughed to herself. *This is no legend.*

What had their creator discussed with the Dragonia? What was he thinking? What disappointed him? Jibril was curious about these questions, but was there much of a point to knowing the answer? She knew she wasn’t the strongest. Five times she had challenged this white dragon, and all five times she had lost. He was unbeatable—unless he came to blows with Artosh, who could surely vanquish him in a single blow.

So this dragon was nowhere near the strongest being in existence. Hence, the battle about to transpire was going to be very different from the legendary tale that occurred here. This wasn’t a clash between titans. Without a question of who was the strongest, there was no need for answers. It was merely a tale of a hopelessly weak Flügel challenging a hopelessly strong Dragonia—nothing more, nothing less. A fool’s attempt to prove that Dragonias were not in fact superior to Flügel; a *hellish duel* of a weak opponent challenging a strong one.

Jibril smiled to herself. Most importantly...her pounding heart and surging

blood had nothing to do with imitating a legendary tale. The reason she couldn't stop trembling was simply because...

"I will defeat you no matter how many losses I must face in the process. This battle is merely a game."

Jibril's words, which were brimming with ecstasy, caused the dragon to stir—and with this minimalistic motion, the sea parted and the heavens burst open. Perhaps he had just laughed, for his voice was rather jovial as he asked Jibril:

"Is that so, Little Feather? Then thou shalt continue to fight me for all eternity, even with the knowledge that thou shalt never win?"

"No, I will show you that it is possible now and today. It won't be as confusing once I've beheaded you. ♥"

The dragon began to flap his wings, pushing a tidal wave of raw energy against Jibril. He laughed.

"Ours was a fruitful discussion. Prepare to be torn asunder once again, Little Feather."

"It was a rather meaningless discussion. Are you fine with those being your last words?"

The rumbling, thunder-stricken channel saw a sixth battle between the dragon and the angel most unlike the legendary duel of long ago. The past five battles had ended in the angel's defeat—all the more reason why this battle needed to be their last.

With utmost confidence, Jibril took up her pen. She turned a page in the journal she had started at some point along this journey. It was particularly full of entries following her fifth and most recent defeat. She recalled the three secret strategies she'd use to eke out victory on this day.

Jibril ran her pen across what was to be the final page in her diary—.....



Eva: 𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂 < 𐄂𐄂 𐄂 Year: 𐄂-𐄂 𐄂𐄂 Day: 𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂

...They really need to do something about the lack of things to do in the Chamber of Restoration. After five losses to that dragon, I'm now spending

more time in the Chamber than outside of it. I need to find a way to pass my time, or else the boredom will kill me long before that Dragonia ever can...

—————

“...Again? Not again... You have the worst luck, youngest sister.”

“Oh, if it isn’t Elder Rafil! I have so much free time on my hands that I’ve taken up drawing. What do you think?”

After a year in the Chamber of Restoration, a certain little girl had finally regained consciousness and was scribbling away in a book.

—Jibril had once again shrunk after being defeated a fifth time by the Dragonia.

Brimming with confidence, she showed her pictures to Rafil, who couldn’t help but groan in response.

“It blows my mind that you could go up against a Dragonia this many times and still be in one piece... Every time you do this, Azril causes a giant ruckus and creates heaps of problems for us. How about going forward, you try thinking of a plan before—?”

“Hmm? I most certainly do have a plan, I’ll have you know. This time, I was able to hit him directly with a Heavenly Smite.”

—*You mean you haven’t been able to do that the first four times?*

Without picking up on the intense expression on Rafil’s face, Jibril cheerfully continued, “What’s strange is, there was no effect—I mean, I was able to pierce through a few scales...but they grew back almost instantly. It’s as if...time itself was reversed.”

—Rafil figured that the Dragonias were probably capable of time control.

“If they had the ability to reverse time, then we wouldn’t be able to kill them no matter how much we threw at them.”

Jibril rejected Rafil’s thought on the spot. The question wasn’t *why couldn’t* she defeat the Dragonia, but—

“Why *can* we defeat the Dragonia...? Rather—*have we actually ever defeated*

one at all?"

They could manipulate time and space at will and take a full-blown Heavenly Smite virtually unscathed.

"Surely the power of one Dragonia could overcome that of another—?"

Rafil sighed—not only did her sister have a plan, she was starting to see a path to victory.

"Well, here's some bad news—there will be no next time. You need to stop this."

".....Pardon?"

"Azril is livid with you—this is an order. She's forbidding anyone to fight a Dragonia alone. Apparently...disciplinary action awaits anyone who defies this order. At least, that's what she said. So I thought I'd tell you."

Rafil turned to leave. She knew her warning would only make Jibril want to challenge the dragon that much more.

Eva: 卍卍卍 < 卍卍卍 Year: 1-7 卍卍 Day: 11 卍

After finally leaving the Chamber of Restoration, I was enjoying a little excursion when an Elf hit me with some kind of anti-flight spell. I ended up bumping my head when I crash-landed, and it hurt so much that I blasted everything in sight with a Heavenly Smite. But then I realized too late that doing so meant I had to go back into the Chamber of Restoration. This only made me madder, so I stole the Elf's entire library so I'd at least have something to do while I was regenerating.

—————

"Again... You did it agaaain?!"

Jibril had finished her previous stint in the Chamber just three days earlier, and here she was in her cute child form yet again. Azril screamed and tore at her own hair. Jibril had used the last bit of her strength to compress the space around her and bring back what appeared to be an immense collection of books.

"Ah, no, this time I Heavenly Smited an Elf. Don't mind me."

“Oh really? All’s well that ends well, then. ♥ As if! Since when did using a Heavenly Smite cut open a hole in your belly?! Even in your child form, an Elf shouldn’t be too much work for you! So what *actually* happened?!” Azril demanded that mini Jibril—who sported *a gaping hole in her abdomen*—answer her.

“Ah, one of them attacked me while I was looking for their library. A multi-layered rite—it was quite the experience. ♪”

Azril was beginning to develop a headache; talking to Jibril was getting her nowhere.

—Right. Multi-casting can be quite pesky.

Using two or more spells at the same time wasn’t that tough. But combining them—now that was tricky.

For example, lighting two small fires didn’t produce a more powerful attack. Multi-casting was more like pouring accelerant on a single fire. Chain-cast spells the right way, and even a Flügel with meager spirit capacity would end up like the one standing before Azril.

“I don’t expect much from a race stupid enough to try and control a Phantasma, but maybe something in these books will give me a hint for killing a Dragonia. ♪”

Azril narrowed her eyes angrily. “_____Jibs. You know I told you *not* to fight that Dragonia alone anymore...right?”

All Jibril did was shoot her a provocative smile before she made her way into the Chamber of Restoration.

Eva: 𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹 < 𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹 Year: 𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹 Day: 𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹

I dived right into the books I’d taken from the Elves only to realize...I can’t read Elven. Why should I have to read their plant language in the first place? I’m starting to feel depressed picturing myself talking to grass just to pass the time, so I think I’ll get some sleep...

Eva: 𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹 < 𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹 Year: 𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹 Day: 𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹𐌺𐌹

Two years passed before I grew desperate enough to talk to grass. I taught myself to read Elven. Boredom can do frightening things to your psyche. I found

some notes titled “Why, I’m a genius. ♥” What kind of airhead writes like this? The notes were so dumb that they ended up piquing my interest.

Era: 𐌲𐌿𐌲𐌿𐌺𐌰 < 𐌸𐌺𐌰 Year: 𐌲𐌰𐌶𐌰 𐌲𐌰 Day: 𐌸𐌰𐌶𐌰

...Three years later, and I have yet to decode the “I’m a genius. ♥” memos... I’m starting to feel suicidal. It’s not that I can’t read them, I just don’t know what they mean. I must be dumber than a blade of grass. ~~I thought I’d get down to the grass’s level, but it appears I was never really above it.~~

I was just about to do something drastic when I came upon a particularly interesting note. The logic involved is far beyond my own powers of comprehension, so I don’t quite understand all the details—but it sounds like the author tried to create their own closed temporal space only for the experimental container to fail. Then they proceeded to toot their own horn despite their failure: “Why, I really must be a genius to have survived that.”

Whatever the case—it looks like I may need to revise my opinion of the Elves. There certainly are some traces of genius living among those plant people.

Era: 𐌲𐌿𐌲𐌿𐌺𐌰 < 𐌸𐌺𐌰 Year: 𐌲𐌰𐌶𐌰 𐌲𐌰 Day: 𐌸𐌰𐌶𐌰

Having expanded my perspective and learned that there are in fact benefits to speaking with grass, I find myself with one day left in the Chamber of Restoration. What I’d like to do most is head straight for that Dragonia for another rematch, but this time, I’m going to make some preparations. I’ll need three things... I’m fairly sure this will be our last encounter, but I don’t want to take any chances. ♥

.....
—What Jibril held in her hands could only be described as, well, a giant mass of steel. Rafil caught sight of the massive hunk of metal that was at least twenty times larger than her youngest sister, who shouldered it.

“Jibril... What have you...got...there...?” Rafil approached Jibril with an indescribable expression on her face.

“Pay this no mind. It’s merely some Dwarf toy I happened to pick up.”
Jibril’s cheerful answer only left Rafil with more questions.

Come to think of it, I did hear something about Jibril destroying a Dwarf

armada. Nothing wrong with that. Annihilating the Dwarves? Sounds good to me. Let's do more of it. Drive them to extinction. I'm all for that. Excellent. Keep up the good work.

The issue here was: What did Jibril plan on doing with that giant piece of scrap metal—?

“You have nothing to worry about—I’m going to win this time.”

Why do I even bother asking? Rafil sighed; her youngest sister was fiercely determined to defeat a Dragonia on her own. Then, a moment later, she realized something.

...She said she'll win this time... Was she this confident the last five times?

“—Ah, Elder, may I borrow a Dragonia bone?”

What's she need that for—? Never mind.

Rafil needed to say it, though. She was about to do so when—

“—Jibs. I gave you an order.”

Just as Rafil went to warn her youngest sister, she was cut off by an inhuman, malicious voice. Appearing from out of nowhere was the First Number, Azril. The world’s strongest Flügel was glaring at Jibril with an annoyed smile on her face.

“Hmm...? What was it, again? Something about not going up against a Dragonia alone, right?” Jibril flashed a bold, sinister grin. “—Correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t recall ever hearing a *reason* to obey that rule. ♥”

The instant Rafil saw Azril getting serious, she realized that Jibril wasn’t frustrated with their eldest sister, nor was she being childish or rebellious. She was *happy* to see Azril like this. It was the perfect moment to test her new strategy, and she couldn’t have asked for a better person to spar with before going up against the Dragonia.

Azril, on the other hand...was worried about Jibril, who was raring and ready to go.

“Jibs... You’re a super-important Flügel... I can’t let you go and get destroyed by a Dragonia.”

—Azril then went and said the one thing she should have never told Jibril:

“Sorry, Jibs, but you’re gonna be spending some more time in the Chamber of Restoration. I’ll make sure not to kill you.”

_____The next moment:

Without even the slightest of motions, a flash of light emitted from Jibril, who was grinning slightly. An entire section of Avant Heim was sent flying along with Azril.

“Nyah?! Wh-what?! Why’d you get so angry all of a sudden?!”

There was an uproar as every Flügel on the Phantasma rushed to see what had happened.

“Azril... Are you insane...?” Rafil asked in utter disbelief. Azril was still shell-shocked. “You’ll *make sure not to kill her*? Do you know how much of an insult that is to Jibril? I’ll give it to you straight—”

—Rafil sounded disappointed with her leader.

“You’ve gone senile. You’re nothing like the Azril who used me to slay an Old Deus.”

—Azril didn’t know what Rafil meant, and once again looked over to Jibril, who was shrouded in darkness; she was compressing her wings, her halo, even her spirits so hard that not even light could escape. Should any of the pathetic worms inhabiting the earth’s surface see her in this form—destruction incarnate—they would surely die.

Azril continued to look at Jibril, and she came to the same conclusion she had before.

_____This isn’t enough.

Regardless of Azril’s high opinion of Jibril, Azril was still stronger than her, no matter which way she cut it. And as the *strongest of all Flügel*, she knew that Jibril’s attack was not even half as powerful as her own. She also realized something else, something of a contradiction: Losing in battle to her youngest sister was *well within the realm of possibility*. These two conflicting hunches caused Azril to hesitate for a moment, unsure of what to do. Something inside

her—perhaps her instincts as a being created for war—made her aware of another contradiction: The enemy in front of you is weaker than you, but to defeat it, you need to hit it with *everything you’ve got*.

A full-power attack against Jibril, even though she was the weaker of the two?

Azril didn’t want to kill her; that would solve nothing.

—Should I fall back? But if I let her go, the Dragonia will kill her. If she’s going to die anyway, I might as well be the one to—

The thought entered her mind for a moment, but she realized it wasn’t the right thing to do. Azril, slightly ashamed, spoke to Jibril:

“...Fine... I won’t...stop you...”

She drooped her head as she muttered her permission for Jibril to fight the dragon.

—Azril knew she didn’t have the right to destroy the Irregular Number, one of her lord’s creations. The crowd of Flügel stared as Azril backed down. They looked disappointed; Jibril looked angry, and Rafil looked disgusted. And then—

“Thou darest abandon a fight in front of thy creator, First Number? Thou hast failed me.”

—Avant Heim—perhaps the entire world—rumbled as the voice of the ultimate being rang out for all to hear. The crowd turned in the direction of the throne room, from where the creator’s holy voice originated. Once he had their attention, he continued.

“—Why dost thou hesitate? This battle is an opportunity to stake thy life against thy opponent’s—a battle where thy soul stands to grow stronger, more refined. Should thou turn thy back on this opportunity, thy wings shall decay upon that same back.”

—As one of my Wings, nothing should frighten you more than losing your own.

—————

With her head still hanging low, Azril took a deep breath and mumbled:

“...Then so be it.”

She lifted her head—no one could believe their eyes. Even Jibril, the target of Azril’s gaze, gulped audibly. The Flügel before her looked like a doll, void of all emotions except for the smile painted on her face.

—With the exception of Rafil, no Flügel present had any idea who they were looking at. She looked like the Azril they knew, and yet, she wasn’t. Her voice was as cold and unfeeling as a steel blade when she declared:

“One strike. That’s all this will take. It’ll be over before you feel any pain—Irregular Number.”

—Then it happened. ***FWOM!***

It was a sound most Flügel didn’t recognize, while others who had forgotten it suddenly remembered: This was the sound of a very frightening power.

In the next instant, Azril appeared in the sky before Jibril with her wings spread out wide. Her halo had expanded many times in size and into multiple complex layers, while her wings had turned black like Jibril’s. Azril’s wings were similarly amassing all nearby spirits until every last bit of light was gone.

Her smile, however, was furious like molten lava. Her battle spirit was completely different from Jibril’s...almost alien. She emitted energy from her body without showing any emotions save for her doll-like smile.

“...Hmph, looks like you have some fight in you after all,” said Rafil. “That’s the big sister I know.”

Excluding Rafil, who found this sight nostalgic, the entire crowd was taken aback by the fearsome show of power in the sky above. It wasn’t just the fearsomeness of the situation that was shocking them. Everyone could tell that Azril was several times stronger than Jibril—no...that her power had exceeded the realm of a Flügel’s—

“S-Sister Rafil! Are you sure we shouldn’t stop this?!”

One of the angels teleported next to Rafil, who shook her head and answered: “—Stop *what? Why?*”

“Uh... Th-that is, I—I mean...is it okay for Flügel to kill each other—?!”

Right. Rafil watched as her two sisters faced off.

—She chuckled to herself upon realizing how brutish the Flügel can get, herself included. They steal one another’s kills, squabble over the smallest trifles, and fill their days with warfare... It was the picture of peace. Yes, *peace*—there is peace in being able to fight about what you want, whenever you want to. During a fight like that, “going easy on someone” would only ever be seen as a slight against them.

That was why Jibril was so mad at Azril; it was how this whole situation started. It was never good to start a battle that would only result in death by showing clear intent to kill unless you have a good reason—such as using a death to lead to a victory. Any other death for a Flügel was absurd. Their lives were gifted to them by their creator for the purpose of destruction.

“Lord Artosh allowed her to do this,” Rafil explained. “What else do you want?”

—All was silent.

What Rafil said was true; there was no reasonable argument. A hush fell over the crowd as all the Flügel watched the two blazing balls of energy in the sky above remain still in a face-off.

Azril waved her hand. With the simple gesture, Avant Heim was enshrouded in a billowing wave of energy. Rafil spoke out as nobody could take their eyes away from the scene.

“Now, Jibril...I don’t see a way for you to defeat *this*—but...”

Azril was going to end the battle in a single attack, just like she said she would. Everyone knew that; there was too great a difference between the two of them. Even then, Rafil had hope. She continued gleefully:

“...if an attack like this kills you, you’ll never stand a chance against a Dragonia. What are you going to do, O youngest sister of mine?”



It’s been thousands of years since I’ve shown my true power. And against Jibs, of all—

Azril stopped herself there. She didn't want her affection for her little sister getting in the way of annihilating her. Azril told herself again and again—her creator asked for this. All she needed to do was let out *one attack*, just like she'd said, and everything would be over. Azril tossed aside her emotions and calmly gazed upon her enemy like an unfeeling machine.

—The Irregular Number was certainly strong. Their creator's power never stopped increasing; it was an endless process. So it only made sense that the later a Flügel was born, the more power it had. This was especially true for the Irregular Number, Artosh's most recent creation. Not only that, the Irregular Number was made with a special purpose.

But Azril knew that Jibril's power was *not great enough*. She had less than a quarter of Azril's strength—and Azril was the strongest Flügel in existence.

Moreover, Jibril was imitating Azril.

—She, too, was readying a single attack for her fight against Azril. *Sigh*. There wasn't a soul in the crowd who couldn't see the blatant difference in power between the two.

—Despite this, the Irregular Number looked utterly confident. She didn't even flinch. It was obvious why.

(This is a battle of Heavenly Smites... She's going to dodge mine, then go for a counterattack... Nyah.)

Should they pit their Heavenly Smites against each other, there was no way the Irregular Number would be able to win. Even if Jibril managed to attack first, it wouldn't be enough to defeat Azril—which meant one thing: Jibril needed to hit Azril after she made her attack, otherwise she would lose the match.

(Might as well say it now—sorry, Jibs.)

A counterattack in these circumstances seemed like the best course of action—however. Azril apathetically thought, *This girl doesn't understand how things work*.

Against such overwhelming power, there would be no *after* for Jibril once Azril made her move.

“Like I said...this is a one-hit kill.”

——*You want to counter my attack? You must be dreaming.*

Azril moved her hand slightly to the side—and it happened.

In an instant quicker than the passage of time itself, the Irregular Number was engulfed in darkness. Jibril was shocked for a brief instant, unable to parse what had just occurred. The spectators were similarly baffled, but Azril still had on the fake smile. She was laughing on the inside. She’d had a feeling about this for a while—that Jibril didn’t know how to wield her own power.

——Heavenly Smite.

This attack involved converting your entire body into spirit corridor junction nerves. Once you are filled with spirit energy taken directly from the spirit corridor, you unleash the attack all at once. The absurd power was synonymous with the Flügel; it was their only named attack. Using it came with a price, but it was powerful enough to defeat nearly every possible foe.

There was, however, a clear inefficiency that the Flügel ignored when it came to using their Heavenly Smites. This lay in using all the power they’d collected at once. To make the most of one’s Heavenly Smite, instead of focusing it into a *single ray of light*, it worked better to just create an explosion.

But that made it impossible to aim, since this strategy dispersed energy in all directions.

——Yet Azril had a way to *avoid* this.

Her Heavenly Smite did not converge into a single beam, nor did it so much as waver.

She took that absurdly powerful amorphous light and brandished it in her right hand—and then the light *disappeared*.

In the same moment, the darkness that had engulfed the Irregular Number, without making a noise or letting off any light, began to vibrate violently until it burst.

——The invisible power rumbled, shaking the air, the very dimension.

A sound rang out, causing Avant Heim and the heavens—the planet—to

quake. The resulting black space elicited shrieks from the crowd when they realized what was going on. Azril apathetically laughed to herself.

...She had moved her target and her Heavenly Smite to a sealed-off space: her own pocket dimension. Her Heavenly Smite bounced off the walls, amplifying infinitely within this dimension; she unleashed her Heavenly Smite at full power within the confined space. It was fully efficient, with every ounce of power dedicated to destroying her target.

____*Heavenly Smites are supposed to implode... It's that simple*____ Nyah.



Anyone else would see a black orb, but the Flügel, who could see spirits, space, and even the invisible, watched on in horror. After all, they could imagine what was happening within the darkness by the fragments of air whirling violently out of the epicenter.

One of the younger sisters approached Rafil. “—Sister Rafil... Has Sister Azril... always been this—?”

Rafil, who had been watching the same scene, could only laugh to herself as she thought about how she'd always known all too well the answer to this younger sister's question. That Azril was this...*horrifying*.

“...You know what an *ultimate attack* is, right?”

“—Ah, um, pardon?”

The girls were confused for a moment, as Rafil had answered their question with another question, but she went on: “It's a phrase that lesser beings like Elves and Dwarves tend to throw around. They call all their attacks the ultimate magic, the ultimate weapon—evidently, they think our Heavenly Smite is our ultimate attack. However—”

She paused, then snickered as she pointed up toward the sky.

“—an ultimate attack needs to obliterate its opponent, or else there's nothing ultimate about it. *Take, for instance—what's above us.*”

The black orb, a space cut off from the rest of the world, was only a few meters wide. Azril had fired off her Heavenly Smite within that space—and she

was now reduced to her child form after using all her power. But the dark orb continued to rupture violently as Azril watched it with that same doll-like smile on her face.

The crowd could do nothing but cry out in horror. It was just as she said before the fight started, that it would end in *one attack*.

—There was no way to escape its absolute power. Only destruction existed in the pocket dimension Azril had created.

The battle was over the moment she used her attack. It was an ultimate attack in the truest sense—an undeniable truth. The attack brought an end to any battle. It brought an end to everything, and always with one strike. Everyone present was horrified.

—Of course they would be. When the angels thought about how Azril could use such an attack, they were overcome with fear. The Flügel. A race made by the god of war, the strongest of the gods. It took them but one wave of the hand to demolish all they laid eyes upon.

—What did their god think he would be fighting against to give them this much power?

It was clearly overkill against one of the other races. However, deploying this ultimate attack on an enemy larger than oneself would be *pointless*. It only worked here because Azril had vastly more power than Jibril—enough to seal her off in a separate dimension. Beings stronger than Azril—such as Phantasmas, Dragonias, and Old Dei—could easily break out of the pocket space, rendering the attack useless.

“She’s the one left in charge of the Flügel—so she’d obviously need a way to exact her might on them,” Rafil continued.

—Her sisters all knew this skill was given to her in order to kill another Flügel, should she need to.

The way Azril, who was weakened and in her child form, calmly watched the darkness with an emotionless smile on her face told them this more than anything.

“Fear not... She used it in front of you all for a reason. It’s her way of telling us

she hopes she'll never have to use it on us."

Think of it as a tiny threat. Rafil chuckled to herself as she shared this with her sisters, but it did little to calm their nerves. They all knew this was just as Rafil described; it was Azril's ultimate attack. Their lives would end the moment she used it on any of them. It didn't matter if they knew about it beforehand—there was no way for any of them to defend against it. Azril having access to such an irrationally powerful attack meant one thing for her sisters:

—Don't fuck with me.

A warning in the clearest sense of the word.

____*Is that really Azril?*

The entire crowd doubted their eyes as the angelic child waited to confirm Jibril's death. But Rafil picked up on something else, and with a big smile on her face...

"I should mention—the phrase 'ultimate attack' is reserved for our Lord and our Lord only."

"____What?"

No matter how powerful Azril may be, unless the ultimate attack was produced by their creator, there was always a flaw, a way to counter it.

—An ultimate attack could only be deployed by an ultimate being. There was always a way to circumvent anything less than ultimate. The attack they were watching was no different.

"Well...how should I put this, Azril? I know—you should be happy. Looks like you got some of your charisma back."

"S-Sister Rafil... Are you *l-laughing?*"

—She was. The moment Azril used her ultimate and final attack, Rafil caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye, something that made her have to keep herself from laughing the entire time. Rafil could no longer keep it in, though, and laughter burst out of her like a breeched dam. *How disrespectful of Azril*, she thought as she snickered to herself. Azril called this her *ultimate attack*. It was precisely why—

“Azril, this is exactly why you’re Azril..... *Sigh...* Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Their creator probably thought this was hilarious, calling an attack not strong enough to kill him “ultimate.”

—Then something happened.

With the exception of Rafil, it was something nobody understood. A beam of light was erupting from Azril’s chest—it had *pierced her from behind*. Azril’s face looked pitiful—it was as if the doll mask had fallen off—then everyone heard a familiar voice that made them go weak.

“Yes... That’s it... That dopey face of yours...suits you so well, Azril...”

“Wh...what happened—? Why’s there a hole in me?!”

—Seeming to have appeared out of nowhere, there was the figure who had stabbed Azril from behind.

It was Jibril, who was clearly on her last legs. Every Flügel in the crowd heard the two sisters’ exchange and thought—

——*Oh, that was Azril all along.*



“Whaaat, uh... Ah-ha-ha, ha-ha, J-Jibs... What did you do to me...?”

...Where’d her charisma from before go? Ms. Serious Azril was no longer there. It was the Azril everyone knew, the one whose dopey voice and dry laugh never failed to ease her sisters’ tension. She sounded like she was in pain.

—Azril had used her Heavenly Smite at full power on a pocket dimension she created. It was an attack she was sure would bring her target certain death. Jibril’s attack pierced her now-childlike body, reduced to this size by the lack of any energy after her attack. Jutting out from her, under where her doll-like smile once was. Stabbed by the person she was so certain she had killed that it almost brought her to tears.

—Jibril answered Azril’s question from behind her:

“...You got too full of yourself, then got stabbed from behind by the Flügel you were looking down on... That’s all...”

—Jibril didn't feel like sharing what she'd *actually* done.

“What was that you said? ‘*One strike*. That’s all this will take. It’ll be over before you feel any pain’?”

—Jibril spoke weakly as they both fell lifelessly from the sky, with Azril still impaled. Jibril had a firm smirk on her face as she continued:

“You were so sure of yourself before—I need to know how you feel now. ♥”

She wouldn't get the answer she expected, though. Azril responded with her usual goofy smile:

“Hee-hee-hee! Jibs! You're alive! I'm sooo happy!!”

.....

The crowd of Flügel watched wearily as the two sisters plummeted to the ground...and muttered to themselves in relief:

—“Oh, hey, Azzie. Welcome baaack.”



“.....What?! I—I lost?! How did that happen?!!”

—The battle ended with Jibril's life intact.

Azril was annoyingly nyahing as she stifled a laugh and buried her face into the ground to hide her happiness. She started flailing her arms and legs like a small child throwing a fit—well, she technically *was* a small child—as if her loss had just hit her.

“Azril...you sure are something... All that charisma you just showed, only to make them forget it by turning back into your usually useless self.”

Rafil's words went unheard by Azril, who was whining away on the ground. “Whyyyy...?! I-I-I...I'm supposed to be the strongest—*hic, hic*—I'm nothing without that! How did I...lose...?”

—The question asked by a somewhat deeply depressed Azril was answered by an unexpected peer.

“...Fret not...Azril... You were stronger than I could have *ever imagined*...” The

frail voice continued. "...You beat all my trump cards...I had set up for that giant lizard...save for one..."

It was as if Azril was lifted out of hell and brought up into the heavens—a huge smile was on her face in response to receiving some respect for once.

"Nyaaaah?! Jibs is praising me?! This calls for celebration! Let's throw a parade —"

"If only...you weren't so...stupid..." Jibril smiled, making sure to drag her sister back down to hell, where she belonged.

"Nyaaaaaaaaah, I'm gonna cry! No one can stop the tears from— Gyanyaaaah?!"

"...I'll stop them. Get a clue, you absolute dunce..."

Rafil drop-kicked Azril to end her crying. She sprang back up like clockwork. Though she had used all her power and had been stabbed, there was something markedly cheerful about her tone—



“Nyah! So Jibs beat me?! How’d that even happen?!”

Azril then looked over at Jibril and gasped. Jibril was also in her child form. She was completely devoid of spirits, much less than when she usually reverted to her child form. She was swaying back and forth; parts of her body were missing. It didn’t look like she would be able to maintain her child form for much longer.

—What did she do? How did this happen to her?

“...We need to get her to the Chamber of Restoration before these wounds are no longer treatable—”

“Nyah! I’ll save Jibs! Everybody hurry, I—whoaaa, the sky is spinning...”

“The same goes for you, you dolt! You have a hole in you! Somebody hold her down!!”

Rafil picked up Jibril and left the commotion centered around Azril behind as she thought:

—*What did Jibril do?*

She had an idea, though it wasn’t possible for Jibril to break out of the pocket dimension Azril had created. Azril’s Heavenly Smite, unleashed in that confined space, was an ultimate attack—or at least it should have been, but Rafil had been able to see something else from this distance. Within the span of a second, probably less, she saw Jibril’s shocked expression when Azril sealed her away. However, just beyond that, Rafil believed she saw a *second* Jibril at the same time. This was why she never feared for Jibril’s life—but how did she do it? Was it a doppelgänger? No, that didn’t explain how she was able to escape Azril’s pocket dimension. So there was only one other explanation. Rafil had an idea of what her youngest sister did, but the question still remained: *How?* In other words—

“She warped through time... Flügel shouldn’t be able to do that—so how did she pull it off?”

Flügel common sense dictated that space wasn’t continuous. It was in a state of constant flow, like waves in the ocean. Flügel were able to open holes in

these waves and travel through them to move to a predetermined, absolute distance. Rafil knew that time worked in a similar way as space did—she had fought enough Dragonias to recognize that they moved through both time and space simultaneously. Unlike space, time didn’t move in a wave motion...or did it? At least, Rafil and other the Flügel didn’t think so.

(Did she figure something out...? Something about how dragons are able to shift through both time and space?)

—Rafil didn’t think it was possible, but it was the only explanation for what she had just witnessed. It wasn’t that far-fetched, either—Jibril had, after all, gone up against this Dragonia five times already.

“She may have found a way to beat someone stronger than her.”

Rafil still didn’t have any idea what it cost Jibril to pull off such a feat, or how she did it in the first place.

I’ll need to ask her when she gets out of the Chamber—oh, almost forgot.

“By the way, Azril. I’m gonna give her the Dragonia bone like I promised. You don’t mind, right?” Rafil asked her older sister, just to make sure.

“Uggghhh... Waaah... Jibs... Urrrgh...” Azril blubbered as she was forcibly taken into custody.

Rafil took her response as a yes_____



Era: 木火土金水 Year: 己未 Day: 丁未

Everything I’ve done has been for this day, this moment. I don’t intend to write anything further in this journal, so I’ll end with one heartfelt wish—all I desire:

“I, a Flügel, have defeated a Dragonia.”

Jibril scrawled one last sentence, then closed her journal and flew toward the dragon she could see in the distance. It wasn’t her utmost determination or desire that drove her, but her will. After losing five times, and going in for her

sixth try, she remembered the question she had when she first fought against the white dragon, on that fateful day that felt like so long ago.

—“Why did I lose?”

It was a question with an answer so painfully obvious that she didn’t understand why she even thought it in the first place, but the real essence of the question was—

—*Just what is a Dragonia...?* Jibril wondered. Then the dragon called out, like a trumpet heralding the start of battle. He spoke in his language, which caused all things in nature to yield to his will.

“EXPLODE.”

—If he commanded the word “die,” the world responded with a “yes, Master.” Those who exercise dominance over their slaves don’t ask them to do things, they command them. The Dragonian tongue was revered as the universal language or the language of creation. It was the edict of a ruler. Should a Dragonia command people to destroy themselves, then those far and wide shall obey the command, without any way to resist. Jibril knew this more than anyone, as she had firsthand experience with how almighty they were. All matter the dragon saw was turned into a white light. It was absurd and unreasonable, but it was how the world worked for them. Jibril had been sucked into this unreasonable cycle.

(—*Azril really is an idiot...*)

She laughed to herself; now was the perfect time. She opened up a hole in space in front of her.

—*The fight would end the moment she used the attack, eh? I can’t believe she considered that an ultimate attack.*

Jibril had already survived a similar attack the first time she went up against the white dragon. She had survived through five ultimate attacks now.

—She knew there was no such thing as an ultimate attack. And the white dragon knew—this angel wasn’t going to heed to his command words like heaven and earth did!

In that very moment, the dragon's tail came swinging toward Jibril at an incomprehensible speed, especially considering the size of his body. It sounded like planets colliding when it hit the ground, producing a massive sound that resonated throughout the entire sea. In a flash, the dragon's tail parted the heavens, earth, and ocean. The shock wave likely pushed several races closer to extinction with the damage it brought them. Nevertheless, the white dragon seemed to be enjoying their battle.

“My. Most impressive, Little Feather—thou hast become light.”

The Dragonia was using two mighty attacks at once: speaking in the Dragonian tongue and swinging its tail at the speed of light. Jibril was able to dodge both of these with grace—she looked at the white dragon with a giant grin on her face.

“I appreciate your kind words, but—it's actually quite easy once you know what you're doing.”

Just as Rafil had predicted—it was possible to dodge the Dragonia's commands by teleporting through space and time milliseconds after they were spoken. The dragon's tail was just barely manageable by freezing time in certain spaces. The Dragonia watched Jibril and let out a mighty laugh.

—Temporal and spatial shifting.

It goes without saying that a normal Flügel would never be able to do such a thing. It simply wasn't possible. Should they try, the same thing that happened during Jibril's fight with Azril would surely happen now. They would use more energy than it took to use a Heavenly Smite and start losing their physical body.

—But doing it in this spot was simple. Jibril knew how to do it here after fighting against the Dragonia five times. Dragons moved through space and time by leaving it behind them. Shifting up to them wasn't possible, which meant that dragons were in a never-ending state of distorting the space and time around them. Using the waves created by the dragon made it easier to move through time and space. That was how Jibril managed to keep up with him.

—That is what it meant to be a dragon—it was the nature of the Dragonias. Jibril's fight with her sister was nothing more than a warm-up.

—So what is a Dragonia? They are gigantic beings capable of commanding more spirits than the Flügel, who were created by the world's strongest god. It could hardly be called magic with how overpowering their language—the words of which commanded nature—was.

—Jibril remembered the first time she was faced with the dragon's impossible power. She knew the moment she was ripped to shreds by his words that she couldn't defeat him. It was the one opponent that made her feel like she was fighting with her creator. She was hit with a realization, or an instinct—perhaps a form of common sense—which dictated that she wouldn't be able to do anything to the dragon, no matter what she hit him with.

—Despite this, she tried again and again to kill him. She struggled with the feeling of helplessness she felt that very first day they battled.

—The notion that it wasn't possible for her to defeat him. How come the Flügel could kill something this incredibly powerful when they were in a group? How come if there were fifty or one hundred of them, they could defeat the Dragonia? There was something absurd about it.

—So Jibril promised herself. If that was the extent of the dragon's power, then she alone would defeat him. That very dragon went on to defeat her five times, with about as much effort as it takes one to whip away dust. It was a contradiction. A contradiction with only one answer, and that was—

“I should apologize for the lackluster performance I showed you in our first five fights.”

Jibril gave a deep bow for the dragon.

—If the Flügel really were powerless compared to the Dragonias, then they shouldn't have been able to fell one no matter what their numbers were. The reality, however, was: They could. The weak defeated the strong; there was only one answer that made this contradiction possible. It was the source of the confidence Jibril had that neither Rafil nor Azril understood.

—Seeing as the Flügel are capable of vanquishing them in battle, Dragonias were never that strong in the first place.

“I'm not used to fighting a cheat of your caliber... I promise you'll enjoy this

battle.”

—Jibril asserted that the Dragonias were simply cheating at their fights. The white dragon looked pleased.

“Oh-ho— Thou callest us Dragonias swindlers?”

“Your strength is without principle and providence. It is based on trickery, nothing more than a sleight of the hand.”

Without principle and providence, in other words, their strength wasn’t actual strength. Removing their tricks would fix the contradiction. To put it simply—

“If I can expose and destroy the trickery on which your strength is based, it should be quite easy for me to defeat you. Today, I’ve come to reveal your tricks. 🎵”

The dragon looked interested in Jibril’s theory. He went on to ask her:

“Is strength without principle and providence not true strength?”

“Correct. With the exception of Lord Artosh, all creatures throughout the entire world are but weaker beings. If there’s a way for one to overcome the other, it would be based purely on trickery. Please watch as I proceed to show you each of the tricks you rely on.”

The dragon was silent for a moment before he burst out in billowing laughter.

“Indeed—thou knowest so much, and yet, thou fail to realize how much thou knowest. This pleases me; I look forward to thy little show.” The dragon spread his wings and gazed upon Jibril with his azure eyes, and continued, *“The future is yet to be seen, but should thou defeat me, thou shalt know. Go and sing before thy creator what thou realize, and what notions thou reject.”*

—I look forward to when thou dost so.

A whirlwind of destruction formed under the dragon as he flapped his massive wings. He appeared to be happy, but it didn’t seem like he desired to speak with Jibril any further, and he prepared for battle.

—Jibril still had no idea what this dragon was talking about. Before her was a being worth fighting; therefore, she wanted to fight it. To Jibril, there was no point to war or battles beyond that.

—A battle that would change all logic as it was understood at that time began in the next moment.



Wings of a tiny angel clashed with wings of a giant dragon.

As if they were recreating the legend from so long ago, their clash went beyond the sea where they battled and shook time itself. The dragon used its tail, claws, fangs, and words to fight against the Flügel. The angel responded by evading, blocking, and parrying his onslaught of attacks.

The battle tore through space and twisted through time, sending the world into a screaming frenzy. It was a phenomenon that far surpassed human knowledge, to the point where it couldn't be called a battle. Those who could distinguish between this clash and the one between the unrivaled god of war and the supreme Ruler of Dragonia knew that only gods themselves were capable of such destruction.

The sea beneath the two foes boiled over, and the mountains came crashing down with the sky.

All light disappeared in a single flash, without leaving a trace. The sight was apocalyptic, as if heaven and earth were collapsing—you had to wonder how someone capable of comprehending such destruction would describe it.

The dragon continued his onslaught of fatal attacks without signs of stopping, but not a single one reached the angel. Some might call it a miracle that she was able to keep up, but the dragon and the angel both knew more than anyone:

She was barely putting any effort into it at all.

The gap in power was still evident, but the little angel gracefully weaved her way through her opponent's attacks, using his power against him. Every time the dragon slipped through space and time, the angel demi-shifted through each wave, just barely escaping death. It was almost ironic; the incredible power of the dragon was what protected the angel.

—Thus the dragon couldn't help but admire her; he was moved by the fight.

It was hard to believe that such a small being, created by the incarnation of emptiness, could come up with such ingenuity.

“Incredible—astounding, even—but alas...”

The dragon was laughing.

“Thou hast not come here to dodge my attacks, hast thee, Little Feather? Is it time for the reveal thou spoke of?”

He sarcastically pointed out how Jibril had yet to launch her own attack. The comment clearly bothered her.

“You’re quite the chatty lizard... Did anyone ever teach you something called a climax?”

She snapped back with some sarcasm of her own, but she definitely wasn’t in as good a spot as she wanted to be in.

—She wasn’t contending with the dragon at all.

The source of this destruction was a mighty dragon unleashing an onslaught of attacks and a tiny angel dodging said attacks for her life, nothing more. Jibril was using the dragon’s power against him to nullify his attacks, but doing so was like walking along a tightrope; there was no room for misjudgment.

From the dragon’s perspective, no matter how hard the angel tried, she wasn’t strong enough to defeat him.

—He was certain of this after their previous five battles.

Even if neither of them landed a finishing blow, he had a great advantage, since Jibril needed to use significant energy to dodge the attacks he effortlessly threw at her. Should the fight push on—eventually time itself would determine the winner. However—Jibril had a way to reverse this outcome.

“...Authors typically structure their writing with plot development followed by a climax—”

Though she was dodging for her life, Jibril never lost the smile that showed her confidence in her victory.

“I’d say we are just about at the point right before the climax, where the plot

falls apart..." She was laughing. "You exist on multiple planes of time, don't you?"

—The dragon was shocked by her assertion. He was at a loss for words.

"What's this? Did I hit the nail on the head? What an interesting little discovery I've made. ♪"

—Jibril had uncovered the essence of a Dragonia's life. They inhabited not only the present, but in the past and the future as well—across three points in time. They were multi-temporal interdimensional beings. This was the secret for their never-ending life and ultimate power that rivaled that of an Old Deus. They didn't live on points of time and space, but throughout it on the whole. Attacking them at one point did nothing, since the wound would instantly heal thanks to their existence in past and future points. Their power, which also existed across multiple planes, could be harnessed infinitely on the plane where they were fighting. A Dragonia's body was nothing more than a vessel for multiple points of time and space to converge—a Deflation World. However—

"—*How didst thou come upon this realization, Little Feather?!*" the dragon demanded, unable to hide his surprise.

—there was no way for her to know this. Even if she did know, she couldn't possibly comprehend it.

That wasn't just for the Flügel; the same went for all living beings that inhabited the present. And yet, it was during this almost legendary fight when she reached a conclusion unbefitting of this frenzied world—

"I figured it out from the stupid look on your face. Thank you for playing along with me this far. ♪"

Now the dragon was truly lost for words.

—She had been bluffing.

The dragon was stunned by the truth. She had tricked him into admitting the essence of Dragonian life by having him react to her question.

Jibril found a small protrusion of earth where she gingerly landed. Hiding the fact that she was on the brink of death, she addressed her foe:

“Now, I’ll tell you the reason I haven’t attacked yet, as you so kindly pointed out earlier.” She tried her best to speak as leisurely as possible. “I know that a single attack is not enough to vanquish you. It’s why I needed you to wait, and for that, I apologize. Now it’s time for the grand unveiling you’ve so eagerly been waiting for. You may want to grab a tissue, for what you are about to behold will shock and amaze you——”

She gave a delicate curtsy for the dragon.

“I’ll attack twice if my first attack isn’t enough. And if you’re still standing, I’ll attack thrice. Behold as I defeat you in not one, not two, but *three* ultimate attacks.”

It wasn’t her unfulfilled desire or boundless determination that drove her, but her will. Her will to show the First Number, and the dragon standing before her, that nothing was ultimate.

“Brace yourself_____for a threefold ultimate attack!”

That brings us to the climax you’ve all been waiting for.

The battle was moving faster and faster until it was three attacks away from the finish. She had already jotted down the conclusion of the battle in her journal—she was going to kill the dragon with the next three attacks. With unwavering purpose, she treaded the path of logic to make it all the way to this final moment. Forget about the Jibril who would hang her head low the moment the battle finished—the final act began with the dragon who had existed for an eternity learning what pain was for the first time.



No matter what time even meant for a battle like this, Jibril’s next three attacks all happened at nearly the same moment.

_____The first attack.

Jibril weaved her way through time and space to appear behind the dragon. In her hands was a giant metal mass. She was going to try and behead him.

(—These dragons exist in multiple planes of time and space? That makes absolutely no sense—!!)

She had many hunches that led her to this theory. Like how the dragons bent space-time, or how they moved, or their seemingly limitless power. And her biggest hint of all—defeating an all-powerful enemy by merely teaming up against it—was more than enough to prove that *something* was up. That there was a trick to the Dragonias' power; it was all a farce. However—seeing her foe unable to hide his shock when she mentioned this theory was all the proof Jibril needed to believe it was true. Her theory: *If I can reveal the trick behind the dragon's power, I can defeat him.*

Jibril was going to copy the Elves and divide her spirit corridor by duocasting to create the biggest effect as possible with the minimal use of spirits. She was going to use the power she developed when she defeated Azril—the power she had sucked up from her and stored in her giant metal sword. Her weapon began to hum.

—It was a piece of the Dwarf airship *Grytha*, the quote-unquote *sword* Jibril had ripped off the ship. Originally a cannon created to pierce the Elves' defensive magic, it was just as primitive in the way it functioned as the Dwarves themselves. The cannon had multiple seal runes etched into it, through which the spirit energy flowed to create a thin stream of hyper-dense spirits, dense enough to penetrate the Elves' magical barrier.

That's it. It was as simple and brutish as that.

(I wonder what's going to happen when I pour Flügel spirits into this thing—how thrilling!)

Jibril was quivering with excitement as she finally used the weapon, which successfully pierced the dragon's hide. She plunged it into him, thus affirming her theory. Her strongest Heavenly Smite barely did anything to a single scale—which would recover instantly after the attack—but her makeshift sword pierced his hide like a knife through butter. However, it didn't take long for her weapon to start melting.

"You would stoop so low as to use Dwarven tools, Little Feather? Nonetheless—thy attack shan't reach me."

"I didn't think it would. Don't get ahead of yourself—we still have two more attacks coming," Jibril replied confidently.

Nonetheless, she fully realized that her chances of winning within this compressed version of time were slim. It was a hopeless wager, like putting all your money on a pig winning a horse race.

However—it was all or nothing. The fact that there was even a chance was more than enough of a reason for her to place her bet!

“Now—surprise me with thy next two attacks—”

And an instant later, he was indeed surprised.

_____The second attack.

Jibril couldn't help but chuckle to herself. *He's going to love this.*

It was why she had saved as much energy as she could up until that point. She was going to put her full power into a Heavenly Smite aimed at the spot where she had impaled the dragon with her makeshift sword. The chuckle was at the thought of the dragon perishing.

—There were two reasons the white dragon was overcome with shock. The first wasn't from the Heavenly Smite that had connected with him, but the fact that something within him had become the catalyst of her Heavenly Smite.

“—Is that—a bone—?!”

Indeed it was.

Jibril had embedded the bone she'd borrowed from Rafil into her sword. The immortal bone—so strong, not even a god could destroy it—was the catalyst for her Heavenly Smite. It opened a hole in the dragon large enough for her Heavenly Smite to travel through. It was as if that was the point the dragon finally realized what was happening—there were pangs of fretfulness that could be heard within his voice. Jibril flashed a slight grin.

—She acquired her next sliver of hope: This attack ever so slightly increased her chance of victory. Dragonias inhabited the past, present, and future. Their power bounced off the walls of time, growing to infinity. Jibril didn't need to know how this worked. The very principle of it was enough of a foundation for her theory as to why the Dragonias can be *overwhelmingly powerful, but not undefeatable*.

They reverberate and amplify their energy—which exists simultaneously in the past, present, and future—into a single point in space-time: a Deflation World. If this is the trick to how they function, the same logic can be applied to destroying them. A Dragonia’s body is a reverberation of their power through multiple planes of time and space; therefore, their power is infinite. This would mean it shouldn’t be possible for anyone or anything to ever overwhelm their power effectively.

The same should be true for all of the Dragonias the Flügel had vanquished in the past, and for all Dragonias to come. All of their victories to this point were due to one thing: that a Dragonia’s body accumulates too much power and *destroys itself from the inside...!*

If a Dragonia’s body is capable of infinitely reverberating its own power between the past and future and into the present...what happens when there is a chink in their impossibly tough armor—their isolated husk of space-time?

A small hole—a wound—is all it would take, and any attack that penetrates that tiny spot would also *reverberate infinitely*. That explained why it took one hundred Flügel to defeat a single dragon. The problem was finding a way to penetrate their armor; after that, they needed only to add but a drop of energy for the dragon to implode.

This brings us to the second reason the dragon was in a state of shock. Not only did his reaction affirm the theory spelled out above—he was also reacting to something else. Upon firing off her second Heavenly Smite, Jibril was reduced to her child form. What could she possibly do for a third attack?

—Jibril smiled. *Oh, it’s coming.*

The tiny Flügel, who was plummeting toward the earth, as she hadn’t the energy left to fly, held her hand across her young chest.

“Surely you didn’t think Dragonias were the only ones capable of a self-sacrificial attack like your Far Cry?”

—Most dragons would say yes, because it was the truth.

It wasn’t possible for other beings, whose existence didn’t rely on such trickery as straddling multiple planes of time and space, to use a skill like a

Dragonias Far Cry. Jibril didn't know how it worked, but she knew that if she used the magic the Elves had developed to try and control living beings like Flügel and Phantasmas on herself—on her own core—she could duplicate a Far Cry's effect.

She knew that destroying her core would cause her to self-destruct, and that she could aim the damage where she wanted to. It was more than enough to suffice the drop of energy needed to send into the hole she'd created and thus destroy her opponent.

_____The third attack.

The Flügel don't normally name their attacks. They exercise their power, control the space around them, and destroy whatever appears in their path. There wasn't any real technique to it; therefore, their attacks weren't worth naming. To a Flügel, attacking was like breathing. But Jibril would use this Smite just once, and on a Dragonia that pushed her this far. She thought it was only appropriate to name her ultimate attack out of respect for her opponent.

"That brings an end to my third attack, which I call—Absolute Smite—and an end to our battle."

—Jibril had forcefully rewritten the magic used by Artosh to create the Flügel. Had Azril been there, she probably would've reprimanded the act as blasphemy against their creator.

"—*Will thou not vanquish me?*" the dragon quietly asked, to which Jibril cocked her head in confusion.

—She remembered a particular phrase in one of the Elf books she'd read while killing time in the Chamber of Restoration: "Let your enemy cut your flesh so that you will smash his bones." At the time, she felt bad for the low-intelligence race and how pitiful of an idea it was to do so. However, if her one and only desire was to truly prove it was possible for a single Flügel to defeat a Dragonia, then—

"I have vanquished you. What difference does it make if a small footnote says I died in the process?"

Jibril needed to be prepared to have her own bones smashed.

She didn't care whether she lived or died so long as she vanquished a Dragonia on her own. Even if she perished, only one thing mattered—her victory.

Jibril's body began to shine brightly.

“____*Incredible.*”

The Dragonia praised Jibril as she lit up the sky the same way she had many times before. Her third and final attack was going to pierce through the dragon's body, a vessel in which time and space converged. She only needed a tiny amount of energy to make it into said vessel, where it would amplify infinitely, eventually blowing the dragon's head off. But Jibril never witnessed this, for at that very moment, she lost consciousness...



“____Did I fail?” Jibril whispered to herself in disbelief.

She could tell she was alive by the faint sensations she felt on her back and the red sky that reflected in her eyes. She no longer had the energy to move; she couldn't feel her arms and legs—she might not even have them anymore.

—*I'm alive.*

Jibril was furious and full of despair at this fact—not to mention filled with crippling frustration. Her being alive meant she failed to successfully rewrite her final spell, which would use her life to take the Dragonia's.

“*Little Feather. Thy light burned brighter than the sun.*”

It sounded like she'd failed. She could barely hear the Dragonia's voice; he seemed very far away.

“...It seems I lost my gamble at the very end... What a pitiful finish...”

—At the end of the day, Jibril was a Flügel. The magic she tried to rewrite was created by Artosh, the god of war, the strongest of the gods. She knew it wouldn't be able to defile the sacred sanctuary where the core of this magic lay. If she were to make an excuse for herself—it wasn't possible to test rewriting the spell out. Her only option was to wing it during the fight. She lamented her final gamble.

“Behold, Glorious Feather—behold with utmost pride as thy enemy perishes.”

She turned her head—surprised that she could still use her neck—to the direction the Dragonia’s voice was coming from. Her vision was blurred, but she could make out the Dragonia’s head—it was dissolving into light that disappeared into the sky.

“Be proud, Little Feather. Thou hast vanquished me. This is my parting gift to thee.”

—Jibril was overcome with pride, just as the Dragonia commanded. She was filled with an intense sense of accomplishment. She had done what she set out to do.

—That fact alone was enough to fill her with so much euphoria, she went numb. She was then gripped with an intense fatigue, and slowly fell asleep. As her eyes began to close, she knew she wouldn’t likely wake from this slumber...

—She didn’t rewrite the spell exactly as she’d aimed to, but she did manage to defeat the Dragonia. Now all her spirit energy was falling apart. She could feel herself melting away into nothingness...

Jibril knew she was dying. Her consciousness began to fade, but the dragon continued:

“There was once a soul who asked the heavens what true strength was.”

“...Sounds like someone with too much time on their hands...” Jibril answered in a raspy voice, and, for some reason, the dragon let out a loud roar of a laugh.

“—I believe it was thou who claimed strength without principle and providence was true strength.”

“I said no such thing. I was only agreeing with you...”

“Then I have a new question for thee: Is there any meaning to meaningless strength—that is, strength without principle or providence?”

“A meaning to strength without meaning...? Are you really going to talk about this in our final moments—? Fine, I’ll oblige. You should be thankful my patience and generosity know no limits.”

Jibril scoffed.

“—My answer is: I could not care less.”

“_____”

“Every being on this entire planet is weak compared to Lord Artosh.”

Jibril looked at the crimson sky, filled with debris, and slowly continued.

“I challenged a being stronger than myself, lost a few times, but eventually emerged victorious. And I enjoyed every moment of it, every minute of my life while I was on this adventure, and our final battle—what a battle it was. I will remember this battle even after I die. I believe you will, too. That’s all I need to feel fulfilled in life. Nothing else really matters to me—do you disagree?”

Jibril’s words made the Dragonia wonder if she would never learn the answers she sought. Or—

“Here is another question: Having honed thy skills and knowledge to defeat me, do you now believe thou art stronger than I?”

“Would you call someone a monster for having slain a monster? I don’t think so. In fact—”

The dragon was certain of something from the way Jibril flatly rejected his notion.

“—I don’t think there’s even a point in trying to figure out who the strongest is.”

—Not only did she realize the big answer, she cast it away without knowing how valuable it was: Everything about Jibril rejected her creator. She would probably never realize that she herself was precisely what the god of war so desired.

She was following the path of a weaker being.

“I’ll have you know that I’m actually one of the more modest Flügel, with a strong grasp of common sense.”

_____.

_____R-right.

The dragon could almost hear the world sharing his reaction. But the Feather

continued:

“You, on the other hand, were completely nonsensical, probably due to your ridiculous strength—that was also the reason for your defeat. All I had to do was pierce a little hole in your defense. You brought defeat onto yourself—my own power had little to do with it.”

“.....”

“If there’s ever a next time for us, here’s some advice...” The Feather sighed. “You ought to learn a little more modesty. Without that, it was easy for someone as sensible as me to defeat someone as nonsensical as you.”

The Elves and Dwarves she’d exterminated in order to achieve this victory were collectively rolling in their graves. “*What the hell is common sense?!*” they screamed.

Nonetheless, relatively speaking, the Flügel really did have a certain amount of common sense when it came to war.

“Verily. Thou speakest the truth.”

The dragon beamed.

—Jibril thought about asking him what he meant by that, but she stopped herself. She had a feeling those words weren’t meant for her. So instead, she asked him something else.

“—Can I ask you your name?” She lay motionless on the ground, almost pleading with the dragon. “If I am to die...then as you wish, I want to die with the pride of knowing I defeated you... And I can’t take full pride in myself if I don’t know your name.”

The dragon agreed wholeheartedly and answered in a quiet voice:

“—Liechengerte, Follower of the Ruler Reginleif the Enlightened.”

“...Liechengerte... A light so far away...”

Jibril said the name over and over under her breath, before clenching her teeth and saying it one last time. The dragon smiled with a sense of satisfaction and turned to face her.

“Little—nay, Glorious Feather. Thou shalt not perish. Thou shalt live to see further days. One day, though, thou will fight an even weaker being. And when that day comes, thou shalt realize what it meant to defeat me. Until then, be proud of what thou have done today. It brings...greater meaning...to my...existence...than there could_____”

—ever be.

His words evaporated into the wind, leaving behind nothing but undying bones.

—Jibril chuckled to herself. Even in the very end, the Dragonia made little to no sense. Yet, amidst her sense of overwhelming accomplishment was the slightest doubt—that the dragon had abandoned her. Loneliness flooded her when...

“Nyaaah?! There’s a dead Dragonia here—JIBS! JIBS, YOU’RE—! CALLING ALL FLÜGEL!!! DEMI-SHIFT TO MY LOCATION IMMEDIATELY!! THAT’S AN ORDER!!! WE’RE GONNA HEAL JIBS ON-SITE! JUST DEMI-SHIFT AV’N’ HERE, WILL YA—?!”

...suddenly, a shrill screech reached her ears, so irksome it instinctively made her grow weary. That was the last thing she remembered before she finally lost consciousness.



Eva: 木木木木木木木木木木 Year: 木木木木木木木木木木 Day: 木木木木木木木木木木

So I, um...survived.

The last line I wrote in this journal makes me want to bury myself in a deep hole. I think I’ll be more careful about what I write in here moving forward...

P.S. I have the most annoying older sister in the world.

...Jibril was flipping through the journal she’d sworn to never open again when she noticed the aforementioned annoying older sister.

“Azril, would you please let go of me?” she asked, her voice cold as ice.

“That’s gonna be a no.”

—It took her four years to regain consciousness, and it was going to take

another six years to make a full recovery. Azril was there in the Chamber of Restoration, latched onto Jibril.

“I hafta stick to you to make sure you don’t go off and do anything ridiculous again! What were you thinking, trying to rewrite your core magic like that?! That was amazing, though, killing a Dragonia by yourself and all. I spoke with the girls about where the best place to hang that dragon’s bones would be, and we decided that once you’re outta here, we’re gonna throw a parade to celebrate your recovery! But I’m sticking by you until then. Do you know how incredible a feat it is to take down a Dragonia?! It’s quite the accomplishment!!”

From the moment Jibril woke up, Azril hadn’t stopped talking to or hugging her. Normally, she would chase her eldest sister out of the room, but Rafil was there to stop her.

“Jibril, don’t even think about it. This sister of yours literally spent the past four years clinging to you while you were asleep. Until you get all your strength back—I’m thinking another two years at least—she’s gonna be stuck to you like glue.”

—Jibril almost felt like passing out again.

She managed to pull herself together and heaved a sigh. “Ugh...forget Annoyiril. Why are you here, Elder Rafil?”

““Annoyiril”? Is that supposed to be me?! That’s a little blunt, wouldn’t ya say?!”

“Hmm? Is there a problem with me wanting to see my youngest sister, who’s accomplished an incredible achievement that I’m very proud of?” Rafil ignored her older sister and patted Jibril on her head. She smiled and continued warmly:

“—You sure are something, Jibril. Don’t do something that insane ever again—but still, you’ve done well.”

Jibril looked up at Rafil; she was so cool. “Sister Rafil... I’d rather you be the leader of the Flügel.”

“What?! Why?! And did you just call her Sister Rafil?! No fair! That’s it! I challenge you to a duel, Raf—”

Azril didn't know this as she whined away, but just outside their room was a crowd of Flügel, and each of them agreed with Jibril's sentiment.

—The moment was cut short when the air began to vibrate, quietly, like a distant earthquake. No one there could ignore the extraordinary power that affected itself on the room. The cramped room—which changed to an expansive space—and the commotion it contained found itself hosting a towering man with an imposing appearance, as if he had been in the room since ancient times. The three girls froze up when they saw him. The god of war, the Ultimate God, their creator, Artosh, had appeared before them.

—He who hadn't left his throne in hundreds, perhaps thousands of years was making a personal visit to the Chamber of Restoration. His arrival must have had an impact on time, or space, or the law of causality, because the room they were in had expanded to hundreds, thousands of times its original size. Having seen their creator stand for the first time, they felt like mere insects in his presence.

“—I hear thou vanquished a dragon, Irregular Number.”

Artosh proudly gazed upon his angelic servants, who were frozen in disbelief.

“What shalt thou do next, my Wings? Wilt thou hone thy strength until thou can vanquish me?”

He spoke with a kind tone, as if that was what he wanted her to do. Azril, Rafil, and all the Flügel listening couldn't believe their ears; they were on the verge of fainting.

“—It may be blasphemous of me to question you, Lord, but I must insist: Did you come all the way here to ask me that? Was it always that easy to get you to stand up?”

Some of the Flügel actually did faint when they heard Jibril's response. Even Azril was beginning to dip in and out of consciousness, but Jibril wasn't finished.

“I couldn't possibly compete with your divine strength, Lord. I am still a weakling.”

She spoke with pride in front of her creator.

“I will one day prove I can drag you from your throne by myself—so for now, please take your seat on the throne where you belong, Lord.”

—*Sit down and shut up.*

The rest of the Flügel proceeded to swoon at Jibril's blatant challenge to their creator's authority.

"HA—HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA____!!"

Artosh let out a boisterous laugh like he had never before. He grinned from ear to ear as he addressed Jibril in a markedly savage tone:

“—Very well. I’ll be waiting atop my throne—Godspeed to thee, my beloved weakling.”

He then disappeared, and the room reverted back to normal. He left behind an infinite number of questions and—

“...Jibs...that—that was...”

“—Huh?”

Jibril looked at her oldest sister, whose eyes were lit up like light bulbs as she shouted.

“You made Lord Artosh smile! And a fighting smile at that!! Does this mean you’re gonna fight Lord Artosh next?! Where do you get the guts to do that? That tiny journal of yours is gonna get massive!!”

"Azril, please calm yourself. I can't understand a word you're saying."

“N-no, Jibril... This is a fight too great even for you—” Even Rafil was caught off guard by what just happened, as were the rest of the Flügel who had been listening. Chaos broke out as the angels—now a mixed bag of envy, astonishment, and admiration—set Avant Heim alight with their chatter.



—He was all by himself, seated on his throne, resting his hand on his cheek, as always. Artosh muttered to the powerful dragon he once vanquished from the top of the world in a legendary battle:

“...Hartileif, O Final one: I see our discussion was indeed fruitful—and yet, it

truly wasn't."

They say dragons can see through the crevasses of time. There wasn't a doubt in Artosh's mind that Hartileif knew this day would come. In which case, what he'd told Artosh turned out to be incredibly true—but it was also something Artosh never wanted to hear.

—That pathetic dragon, the one Artosh had almost forgotten he'd ever fought—that very dragon had challenged the god of war knowing he was weaker than him, but he didn't have the mettle to try and overcome him despite his weakness. If you know you are weak, shouldn't you try to push forward regardless?

He should have greeted the strongest being with open arms. Artosh would never understand Hartileif, who had accepted his death gracefully.

—Challenging the strong is all I desire, yet it is also why I cannot attain happiness...

"And yet—the day I await may not be so far off."

It was the year 𐌂𐌋𐌗𐌊𐌛𐌰 —the Great War would come to an end twelve years later. But the god of war, even with his divine knowledge, had no way of knowing this.

Artosh quietly sneered as he imagined the battles that awaited one of his Wings.

AFTERWORD

“War. War never changes.” A quote from the opening of *Fallout*.

—The history of humankind—specifically, human warfare—is but a long chain of mistakes. Since the dawn of time, countless nations and civilizations have risen and fallen like stars. Changing times bring new technologies. And now we’re here, in a modern time plagued with winnerless wars...

Humans will wage war until the end of time. Even if a nuclear holocaust decimates the planet, people will revert to arming themselves with sticks and stones. Just like the above quote reads: “War never changes,” even if the tools of war do...

.....—

...Anyway.

If I were a pessimistic person, I’d probably finish the afterword here, but *I ain’t no pessimist*. I’d like my dear readers to take a second and really think this through.

I mean, it’s not like people *want* to go to war with each other, right? Like, if there was some sort of war-obsessed masochist out there, I think most people would be pretty put off. ‘Cos, you know...war looks pretty painful, am I right or am I right? Really though, who *wants* to get shot? It looks like it hurts like hell. Let’s be real here: If there were that many masochists running around, the human race would’ve gone extinct a long time ago.

—So then why do people wage war? Heh... The reason is actually very simple.

Before, it was like *that*—but now, it’s like *this*.

Last time, *that* happened—but what will happen *this* time?

—That’s the gist.

Time and time again, what we've learned from history is that people don't learn anything from history—well, not necessarily! The actual problem is much simpler: History doesn't *literally* repeat itself!

That's why people always think, "Oh, this time, things are gonna be different," or "It'll work out next time!" Driven by a bold vision and wishful thinking, humans repeat the same mistakes we have for centuries...

And so, dear readers...I ask you not to give up on humanity. Those who carved out their place in history merely believed "This time, things are gonna be different" or "It'll work out next time—!" They struggled, they fought, they fretted—and they went to war...!

Oh, but what do you know? It was a mistake this time, too! We turn our mistakes into the foundations for our next mistake... We don't reprimand ourselves for what happened, but commend ourselves for it.

In order to prevent the same mistakes from happening again, we don't get rid of the bad actors—but write off our blunders as "Hey, people make mistakes!"

And that gives us the confidence to say—we won't make the same mistakes ever again!!

—Indeed. Take me for example. My publisher wanted me to write forty pages of text. Should be easy. I mean, writing about the Great War was pretty tough the first time around, but it shouldn't be that hard now that I've done it once before. You want me to write about how the War ended from Think's perspective? Gimme three days!

—Yeah... Easier said than done. I had no idea how hard it was to write from the perspective of an Elf, much less the sheer amount of lore there was to describe. I've walked this same blundering path more times than I've walked the path to the convenience store. But don't forsake me, dear reader. In fact, I'd like you all to commend me as such:

Why the hell are you like this—?!

Anyway... Hey, everyone, it's been a while. Yuu Kamiya here. I recently got the results of my latest brain scan, and the doctor said everything looked normal. I was unironically shocked.

Here's an example of what my history-repeats-itself style mistakes look like:

"Good! Let's get straight to the part where you commend yourself for repeating the same mistakes! (*grin*)"

Oh! If it isn't my editor, T! Thanks for once again pointing out my habit of shirking responsibility!!

Man, y'know, you can be real helpful someti—

"(*deadpan*) I noticed you submitted **180** pages for the first draft."

——,

...Y-yeah.

See, writing about all the intricacies involved in warfare gets pretty complex...

I know—let's be constructive about this. The question you need to ask is *not* "Why did you?" but rather "*Why didn't we stop you?*" An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of repeated mistakes, wouldn't you say? Do you remember what you told me when I first showed you the plot for this draft?

"(*confused*) I believe I said (*with a smile*) 'Sounds good! Let's go with that.'"

YES! YOU DID!! DIDN'T YOU?!?!?!?

That is where the first mistake happened. What I needed you to say was:

"There's no way this plot will fit into forty pages!!!"

Had you said that, this would've never happ—

".....(*grin*)"

I mean, it would've happened anyway!!

Honestly, keeping it under forty pages is my own damn responsibility!!

I can see the smug look I'd had on my face when I said, "Oh, sure, I'll make it less than forty pages, ha-ha-ha-ha!" Bringing up the Dwarves in this spin-off before I even talk about them in the main series wasn't the smartest thing to do, either! I always end up digging my own grave here, don't I?! Sorry for being a giant masochist, but I, uh...I came through in the end, didn't I?! I managed to get it down to the right page number, and even made the deadline! N-not to

mention—

I did this all while we were making the *No Game No Life: Zero* movie and the *No Game No Life, Please!* manga!!

There was a lot of work on my part that went into making those, you know! I multitasked my ass off and still hit the deadline, by the skin of my neck! ...Or is it skin of my teeth?

“Teeth don’t even have skin. I’ve always thought that was a strange expression. *(smile)*”

I-i-i-in any case! I’ve already started the writing the tenth installment of *No Game No Life*!! And there you have your obligatory line of promo, so I’m thinking you guys could cut me a little slack!

Anyway, that’s enough for this afterword! See you next time!

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